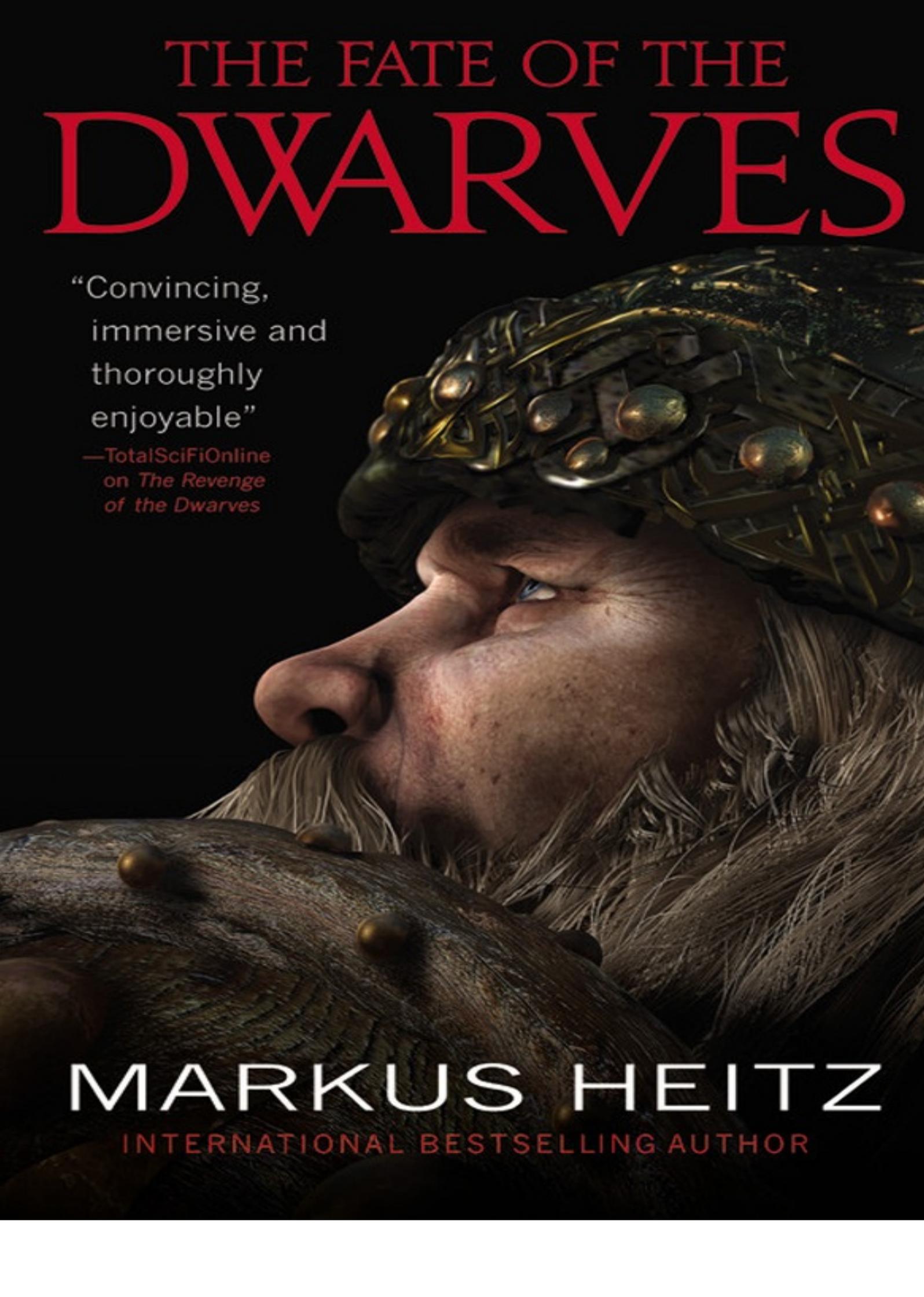


THE FATE OF THE DWARVES



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MARKUS HEITZ

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

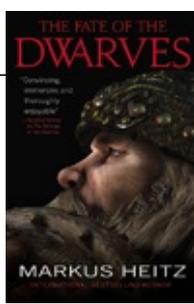
THE FATE OF THE
DWARVES

MARKUS HEITZ

Translated by Sheelagh Alabaster



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Dedicated
to all the friends of the “small folk.”

You have earned this!

“Word goeth that ye dwerffes be greyt relayters of riddles and wit. One of ye most famous is sedd to be the tayle wheyre an orc asketh a dwerff ye way and ye dwerff answereth.

Ye tayle goeth lyke this: One ~~aurbit~~ orbit an orc was strollyng along a road, its eyes fixed on ye path, but still not knowyng whych way to tayke.

It so happened that a dwerff was standing at that very crossroads seeing what was to be seen. Ye dwerff bore an axe of pure vraccasium, his chayne mayle tunic was strong and fynely wrought, fit to withstand ye arrows, swords and blaydes of all kinds.

And it was clear from his stature that he fain must be one of ye fiercest and most valiant warriors among all ye tribes of ye dwerffes. His beard was brayded and oiled. Tiny pieces of gold were to be seen thredded into sed beard, whych was twisted around with fyne silver wyre to keep it in form. A very master among dwerffes, to speak true, with his hair and his weapons and his armour!

~~And so the orc comes and sees the dwarf...~~

~~And then the dwarf comes...~~

And ye orc comes up to him and asks ye ~~twerf~~ dwerff whych road ~~where long~~ to tayke”

—Taken from “Descriptions of ye Ffolk of Girdlegyrd: Manneris and Karacterystycks” In the Great Archive of Viransiensis, drawn up by Tanduweyt, collected by M.A. Het, Magister Folkloricum, in the 4300th solar cycle, a fragment, much of the document having been destroyed in fire

“To be totally honest, I don’t care for the story at all. I still don’t understand why the whole world seems so keen to know the punch line. In my view the whole thing is a complete waste of time. But, you know what? They all laugh. It’s beyond me.”

—Hargorin Deathbringer, Leader of the Black Squadron

“If I have to tell the joke about the orc and the dwarf one more time, even ONE SINGLE TIME, I’ll go dwarfingly fighting mad, and I shan’t rest till all the idiots who want to hear the stupid thing are slaughtered. I swear this on my crow’s beak!

And I don’t care if it’s a twenty-headed dragon asking for it or a singing dancing talking unicorn or a shiny fairy who’s got a thousand wishes to grant me. I DON’T CARE! I’ll kill them all, no matter who they are! No more jokes, got it?”

—Boindil “Ireheart” Doubleblade from the clan of Swinging Axes, of the secondling folk, spoken at a banquet held in Mifurdania in honour of the comedians and descendants of Rodarion

Girdlegard

200 Miles



Prologue

*The Outer Lands,
The Black Abyss,
Winter, 6491st Solar Cycle*

The air was filled with the smell of bone dust, ice-cold stone and frosty damp. The thin-armed creature stepped cautiously out of the shadow of a rock and blinked. Ten paces ahead the shimmering made everything on the far side appear hazy. The same as always.

The nameless creature sent a long green tongue over the skin of its doglike face, revealing needle-sharp teeth. With two of its sixteen fingers it explored the short dark fur under the dirty armor, scratched itself and yawned. It adjusted the armor that was pressing uncomfortably on its balls.

It gave a sigh of relief and then another yawn.

On the orders of the Strongest One it had to keep watch from dawn to dusk and immediately report any changes to the quivering vibrations in the air. It was a boring task. Thankless and boring.

After a while it picked up and ate a yellow beetle emerging from under a moldering thighbone on the ground. As it chewed it occurred to the creature that not one of the hundreds of its own kind could remember a time when the air had *not* shimmered.

It grunted and kicked at the black wall of rock, then strolled up to the edge, trailing an over-long sword. As the rusty brown metal blade scraped against the rock floor, it collected yet more dents and notches.

The creature sat down on the ground next to the shimmering. Yawning, it picked up a pebble and idly chucked it. The air hissed and flashed, for a second turning opaque like murky water and stopping the pebble's flight. The little stone bounced back and landed at the tip of the creature's boots. Another sigh. This was a ritual that never ever changed. It was obvious why the pebbles were being chucked: They did not disappear straight away when they met the shimmering.

There had been times when the invisible barrier had simply been an indestructible wall. It would hurt if you ran into it, but nothing else happened. Then, all of a sudden, the wall would destroy whatever touched it: There'd be a crackling flash and you'd be drenched in fire and burned to a fine cinder ash that blew away in the wind. But for about seven world-ages now, the wall had been taking quite a long time to actually kill you. If you were quick and tore yourself back off it you'd get away with a burn.

On the other side the creature could pick out a strange vertical structure composed of metal rings. When the sun stood high there'd be a bright light in the center. Every so often a few small chunky two-leggers could be seen going up to the rings, walking around and then disappearing again. You could just see strong high walls with colorful flags atop square towers, but the shimmering made everything indistinct. The towers were quite a way off.

If it tried very hard, the creature could make out twoleggers walking to and fro on the battlements. They looked different from the ones that marched round inspecting the interlocking iron rings. Bet their job was just as boring—and would remain so until some time in the future the air no longer made waves like on a hot summer's day.

That was the moment the Strongest One had been waiting for, along with so many others, big and small, two-leggers and many-leggers, screech-phantoms and soul-rippers alike—and the kordrion, of

course. Even the Strongest One was afraid of the kordrion—the flying horror was obeyed by all.

When the shimmering stopped a new empire would open up, the Strongest One had told them. There'd be delicious fresh meat and rich pickings for all. The Strongest One before the Strongest One had promised that as well. And the one before that, the Strongest Ever, had said the same.

The creature didn't believe it any longer, but wasn't going to let on. You died soon enough if you stepped out of line. A single life was nothing—the Strongest One had thousands of nameless foot soldiers at his beck and call.

Another pebble was chucked, half-heartedly. The large brown beetle crawling out of its rocky hiding place was really much more interesting.

Moving swiftly, the creature grabbed the beetle, pulled off the poisonous mandibles and sucked out the entrails, which tasted of rotten wanko berries. There was a lot of satisfied chewing. The empty beetle case was discarded and the creature bent down. Where had the pebble fallen this time?

Long fingers searching the ground found—nothing.

Curiosity now aroused, it lifted its head and saw the small stone lying out in the sunshine.

Snorting in disbelief, the creature got up and stared: The shimmering had stopped.

It hardly dared to move. Its whole body was tingling. Its nostrils widened to catch new scents. For the first time you could smell the land on the other side without the stupid filter: Flesh, iron, dust, stone—the smells of excitingly different things in your nose. Freedom! Booty! Meat! And untold treasure!

Looking back at the entrance to the underground empire of the Strongest One and the kordrion, the creature knew it had to make its report as quickly as anything, but... It turned its narrow head again, long pointed ears erect. Why not take another look before anyone else turned up? What was the world out there going to look like without that shimmer effect? Might there be some rich pickings to secure for personal use?

You'd have to inspect it properly, or your report wouldn't be accurate. There was a big chance they'd call you a liar if your description wasn't specific enough. Liars got treated the same way as the ones who stepped out of line. A *very* good reason for not racing off to the Strongest One's lair in the abyss, quite apart from the rich-pickings possibility.

Carefully, one step at a time. Here's the edge of the rocks now, and then out into the sunshine.

Any hope of a bit of secret pillaging died a death. Those fortress walls couldn't possibly be scaled. The Strongest One's help would be needed there. The kordrion's, too. Tough... Without the distortion caused by the shimmering those square towers appeared even more invulnerable than ever. The creature's dreams of rich pickings and fresh meat faded fast. The stonemason's art up there—you wouldn't get that type of thing back home.

But the creature's approach had been noted. Vast numbers of weapons were heard rattling. Shouts came from the battlements. Then the dread sound of alarm horns.

This was scary. Best duck down!

Still trying to get a good look at all the colors and the patterns on the banners, the creature turned tail and made for the rocks—but a hefty blow on the back hurled it to the ground. The sword slipped out of its grasp.

It could scarcely breathe. It spat and saw its own green blood! But then the pain flooded through from the wound.

Yowling and whimpering by turns, it clutched at a thin wooden shaft sticking in its back.

From the right-hand side something came hissing, striking the creature in the face, shattering the upper jaw and adding to the torture. The howls grew louder and stopped, suddenly, when a dozen

arrows whirred in from all directions.

~~One arm pierced and anchored to the flank, the creature dragged itself steadfastly on, groaning and spluttering. The Strongest One must get the report and avenge the death. Let the storm break!~~

Once back in the shadow of the rocks, past the place where the air normally shimmered, everything felt safer. Now the report would be made!

All at once the smell in the air changed.

In spite of all the blood and the mashed nose, you could sense it clearly: It was the smell you got just before a thunderstorm. Invisible energy was gathering, crackling all around.

Shrieking in terror, the creature clutched at the floor of dust and ground-up bones, trying to get a hold to pull itself forward...

The magic sphere flared into being once more, cutting the creature in half at the hips.

One last ghastly scream escaped its throat before it died; the legs convulsed for a time before falling still.

“Praise and thanks to Vraccas! The shield is up again!” Boïndil Doubleblade, known by friends and enemies alike as Ireheart on account of his ungovernable rage in combat, had observed the fate of the thin-armed creature. Putting the telescope down on the stone parapet, he watched the glittering shield that enclosed the Black Abyss. “The artifact seems to be running out of power.” He turned a quizzical gaze on Goda. “Can you tell me anything about that?”

He was standing with his beloved consort on the north tower of Evildam, which had defended these parts for the past two hundred and twenty-one cycles.

Built by dwarves, undergroundlings, ubariu and humans, the four walls of the fortress formed a square thirty paces high and, at the widest points, over fifteen paces thick round the Black Abyss. The structure was simple in form but masterful in execution. The cooperation of the various participators had ensured the creation of something unique, even if the dwarves’ contribution had been the greatest part. Ireheart was proud of it. The runes on the towers praised Vraccas, Ubar and Palandiell.

Catapults installed on the broad walkways, the towers and the levels beneath the roofed platforms could launch stones, arrows and spears when needed; there were enough missiles in store to contend even with attackers outnumbering them by many hundreds to one. A garrison of two thousand warriors manned the defenses of Evildam, ready to take up arms and fight back dark armies.

But for two hundred and twenty-one cycles this had never been necessary.

The creature that lay there in its own blood was the first ever to leave the prison: A dark cleft half mile long and a hundred paces wide was a blemish on the surrounding landscape and marked where evil would emerge if the magic barrier and the fortress allowed it.

Goda turned to her warrior husband—a sturdy secondling dwarf with such a reputation and so much combat experience behind him that he had been appointed commander of the fortress. She tilted her head to one side; dark blond hair poked out from under her cap.

“Are you *afraid* the shield won’t hold, or are you *hoping* it won’t?” In contrast to Ireheart, who wore sporting a chain-mail shirt reinforced with iron plates, she wore a long light gray dress, simple and unadorned apart from the gold thread embroidering the belt. Goda wasn’t even carrying a dagger, showing plainly that she eschewed conventional fighting. Her arsenal was a magic one.

“Oh, I’m not afraid of what’s out there in the Black Abyss! It can’t be any worse than what’s abroad in Girdlegard,” he growled, pretending to be offended as he stroked his thick black beard, now exhibiting its fair share of silvery gray. It was a sign of his advanced age. But really he was in the

prime of life. Ireheart gave his wife a sad little smile. "And I've never given up hope from the day he went to the other side." He turned his head back to gaze at the entrance to the Black Abyss, over behind the shield. "That's why I'm waiting here. By Vraccas, if I could only glimpse him behind that shield, I'd be off like a shot to help! With all the strength at my disposal." He slammed both fists down on the top of the wall.

Goda looked over at the artifact with its impenetrable sphere enclosing the abyss. The artifact stood at the entrance to the Black Abyss and was composed of four interlocking vertical iron rings which formed a kind of ball with a diameter of twenty paces. The metal circles showed runes, signs, notches and marks; horizontal reinforcements connected to the central point where there was a fixture decorated with symbols. And it was there that its power was to be found: It drew its strength from a diamond in which enormous amounts of magic energy were stored.

But the stone was developing defects; each orbit would bring yet another fissure. When that happened you could hear the cracking sound echo from the fortress walls. All the soldiers were aware of it.

"I can't say how much more it can take," Goda told him quietly, her brows knitted in concern. "It could give at any moment or it could last for many cycles yet."

Ireheart sighed and nodded to the guards passing on their rounds. "How do you mean?" he growled, rubbing the shaved sides of his head. Then he adjusted the plait of dark hair that hung down the length of his back. It was showing just as much silver now as the beard. "Can't you be more specific?"

"I can only repeat what I always say when you ask that, husband: I don't know." She didn't take his unfriendly tone amiss because she knew it stemmed from worry. Over two hundred and fifty cycles of worry. "Perhaps Lot-Ionan could have given you a better answer."

Ireheart's laugh was short, humorless and harsh. "I know what he'd give me if we met now. I expect it would be an extermination spell right between the eyes." He picked up and shouldered his crow's beak, the one his twin brother Boëndal Hookhand had once carried into battle. He made his way along the walkway. He used his twin's long-handled weapon in honor of his memory: It had a heavy flat hammer head on the one side and a curved spike on the other, the length of your arm. No armor could withstand a crow's beak wielded by a dwarf.

Goda followed him. Time to do the rounds.

"Did you ever think we would spend so long here in the Outer Lands?" he asked her pensively.

"No more than I ever thought things in Girdlegard could change like they have," she replied. Goda was surprised by her companion's thoughtful mood. The two of them had forged the iron band together many cycles before.

Their love had provided them with seven children: Two girls and five sons. The artifact had not objected to its keeper no longer being a virgin, as long as her soul was still pure. Goda had retained this innocence of spirit. Nothing dark had entered her mind. She had remained free of deceit, trickery and power lust.

The fact that she had abandoned Lot-Ionan made this very clear. Many others had remained with him. She had gained herself a powerful enemy by leaving him. "Don't you think it's time to go back and support them? You know they've been waiting for you. Waiting for the last great dwarf-hero from the glorious cycles."

"Go back and leave you alone, when the artifact may burst at any moment? Give up command of the fortress?" Ireheart shook his head violently. "Never! If monsters and fiends come pouring out of the Black Abyss I've got to be here to hold them back, together with you and our children and my warriors." He put his arm round her shoulder. "If this evil were to flood over into Girdlegard there

would be no hope at all anymore. For no one, whatever race they belong to.”

“Why stop Boëndalin going back to our people? He could go in your place,” she urged him gently. “At least it would give the children of the Smith a signal...”

“Boëndalin is too good a fighter to be spared,” he interrupted her. “I need him to train the troops.” Ireheart’s eyes grew hard. “None of my sons and daughters shall leave my side until we’ve closed up the Black Abyss for all time and filled it up with molten steel.”

Goda sighed. “Today’s not one of your best orbits, Ireheart.”

He stopped, placed his crow’s beak on the ground and took her hands in his. “Forgive me, wife. By seeing the shield collapse like that, and then seeing how long it took to repair itself, it’s really got me worried. I can easily be unfair when I’m troubled.” He gave a faint smile to ask for forgiveness. She smiled in her turn.

They marched to the tower and went down in the lift, which worked with a system of counterweights and winches.

One hundred heavily armed ubariu warriors were waiting for them at the fortress gates.

Ireheart scanned their faces. Even after all those cycles they were still foreign to him. It had never felt right to forge friendships with a people who looked for all the world like orcs. Only bigger.

Their eyes shone bright red like little suns. In contrast to Tion’s creatures, the ubariu kept themselves very clean and their character was different too, because they had turned their back on evil and on random cruelty to others—at least that was what the undergroundlings claimed. The undergroundlings were the dwarves of the Outer Lands...

And even if there had never been cause for doubt, Ireheart’s nature would never allow him to lay aside his scruples and accept them as equals, as friends. For himself, in contrast to how his wife and children felt, they would never be more than military allies.

Goda gave him a little push and he pulled himself together. He knew his reservations were unjustified, but he couldn’t help it. Vraccas had hammered a hatred of orcs and all of Tion’s creatures into the Girdlegard dwarves. The ubariu had the misfortune to look like evil—and yet there was no way round it: They had to work together to guard the Black Abyss.

Ireheart gave the gatekeeper a signal.

Shouts were heard, strong arms moved chains and pulley ropes to set the heavy cogs in motion to open the main door. With a screech of iron the massive gate, eleven paces by seven, rose up to make a gap through which the column of soldiers could march out toward the artifact.

“We’ll check the edges of the shield today,” Ireheart told Pfallgur, the ubari standing next to him. “I wouldn’t put it past these beasts to have dug an escape tunnel. You go one way, we’ll take the other. I’ll start at the artifact. You get along.”

“Understood, general,” the ubari’s deep voice responded, passing on the orders.

They traversed the basin that held the Black Abyss. The sides were smooth and black as colored glass, and steep paths led off to the right and left, ending at the protective sphere.

Ireheart turned right toward the artifact; the ubari led his troops in the other direction.

While Goda used her telescope to inspect in minute detail both the diamond and the structure, which was enclosed in the same kind of energy dome as the abyss itself, Ireheart went over to the corpse of the abyss creature. On this side of the barrier lay the ugly thin legs that didn’t look capable of ever having walked properly in those heavy boots. On the other side Ireheart could vaguely make out its upper body, pierced with arrows. Greenish blood had formed puddles and little rivulets.

“Stupid freak,” he said under his breath, kicking the creature’s left leg. “Your moment of freedom only brought you death.” Ireheart looked up and stared into the chasm. “Did you come on your own

when you saw the shield was failing?” he asked quietly, as if the creature could hear him.

“Boindil!” he heard Goda call, her voice excited.

Something wrong with the diamond? He was just about to turn round to speak to her when he thought he noticed a movement in the darkness.

Ireheart stopped and stared fixedly.

The strength of the magic barrier was making his mustache hairs stand on end. Or was it that feeling of unease?

“Boindil, come on!” his wife called, attempting to get his attention again. “I’ve got something to...”

Ireheart raised his right hand to show he had heard her but that he needed quiet. His brown eyes searched the twilight for vague figures.

Once more he noticed a slight scurrying movement—something going from one rock to the next. There it came again. And yet another!

There was no doubt in his mind that more monsters were creeping up. Had they sensed the poor state of the barrier? Did they have the advantage here with their animal instincts?

“I want...” he called over his shoulder. Surprise cut off his words. Wasn’t that a *dwarf helmet*?

“This confounded distortion!” he yelled, taking a step forward. Standing dangerously close to the sphere, such that he could hear the humming sound it made, its pitch varying, he called out in a mix of hope and expectation. “Tungdil?” He nearly laid his hand on the energy screen; then gulped in distress. His throat had never felt so constricted before. “Vraccas, don’t let my eyes be deceiving me,” he prayed.

Then a huge pale claw, as broad as three castle gates, appeared out of the shadows, and gave a thundering blow to the sphere, producing a dull echo. The ground shook.

Ireheart jumped back with a curse, hitting out with his weapon as a reflex. The steel head of the crow’s beak crashed against the barrier, but ineffectually. “The kordrion is back!” he bellowed, noting with grim satisfaction that the alarm trumpets on the battlements immediately sounded a warning to the soldiers to man the catapults. All those drills he made them do were paying off.

The pale claw curled, its long talons scraping along the inner side of the shield, creating bright yellow sparks. Then the kordrion retreated and a wall of white fire rolled in, slapping up against the barrier like a wave and washing all around.

Ireheart retreated, dazzled, stumbling backwards to the artifact. “It won’t hold for long,” he shouted to Goda. “The beasts know it and they’re gathering.”

“The diamond!” she called back. “It’s crumbling!”

“What? Not now, in Vraccas’s name!” At last he could see again: Behind the force wall stood a range of monsters brandishing weapons! “Oh, you fiendish...”

Most were like that creature that had been cut in half; but there were others, significantly broader in the beam, much stronger and terrifying in appearance. No nightmare could have come up with better.

“By Vraccas,” Ireheart breathed, bereft that his friend, Tungdil, had not come, after all. He issued brisk orders to the ubariu, telling them to spread out in front of the artifact to protect Goda. The warriors formed a wall of bodies, iron and shields, their lances pointing forward like so many defensive tentacles. Ireheart turned to Goda and saw that she was touching the shimmering sphere. “What’s happening?” he called.

She was deathly pale. “A piece... of the diamond has come away,” she stammered. “I can’t hold it...”

There was a loud crack, like the noise of ice breaking. They all stared at the jewel. It had suddenly gone a darker color and there was a distinct fissure on its surface. The barrier fizzed and flickered. Layer upon layer was flaking off the edges of the diamond and falling to the ground. It was nearing the end.

“Get back!” commanded Ireheart. “Get back to the fort! We stand no chance here.” He took Goda’s hand and ran with her. In recent cycles he had grown to know the difference between courage and the insanity that used to overtake him in battle. His sons, too, had needed to learn the same lesson. The madness wasn’t something he was proud of handing on to them.

The ubariu warriors kept pace with them, even though they could easily have covered the distance much more swiftly than the dwarves. Goda found it well-nigh impossible to tear herself away from the artifact, but was dragged along by her colleagues.

With a brilliant flash and an ear-splitting detonation the diamond burst apart, the force of the explosion bringing the whole structure down. Parts of the vertical iron circles broke off and flew through the air to bury themselves in the ground several paces off. The ends were glowing. There must have been incredible heat involved.

At the same time—the barrier at the Black Abyss fell!

The maga could clearly see the army of beasts—there was no immovable power to hold them back now. The wind carried an unbelievable stink over to her, a mixture of excrement, stale blood and sour milk. Grayish white clouds of dust and bone meal flurried up like mist in front of the somber rock face. Figures appeared out of the fog.

Behind the army the pale dragon-like head of the kordrion reared up out of the chasm, horns and spikes erect. The four gray upper eyes were assessing the walls of the fortress as if to judge what weaponry might be used against it and its followers. The two lower blue eyes beneath the long bony muzzle were fixed on the ubariu and the fleeing dwarves.

“Vraccas!” exclaimed Goda, who was gathering her magic powers ready for defense. She had spotted a helmet among the first row of smaller monsters—a helmet as worn by children of the Smiths.

Then a dwarf stepped forward, head to foot in dark armor made of tionium; glimmering inlay patterns glowed in turn. The creatures all drew back in respect.

In his right hand he held a weapon that was a legend in Girdlegard and the Outer Lands alike, black as the blackest shadow and longer than a human arm. On one side the blade was thicker and had long thin teeth like a comb, and on the other side it thinned out like a sword.

“Bloodthirster,” breathed Goda and stopped in her tracks. Ireheart was brought to a halt. He turned—and froze. Words failed him.

The dwarf in the night-colored armor raised his left hand to lift his visor. A familiar face with a golden eye patch could be seen, but the features were hard and marked with bitterness. His cold, cruel smile promised death. Then he held his weapon aloft and looked to the right and to the left. The creatures responded with shouts.

“Vraccas defend us: He *has* returned!” whispered Goda in horror. “Returned as the Commander of Evil!”

At that moment discordant trumpets blared out from the abyss, echoing off the bare rock. The kordrion opened its muzzle to utter a furious roar.

*The Outer Lands,
The Black Abyss,
Winter, 6491st Solar Cycle*

Ireheart stared at his friend, so sorely missed and so eagerly awaited, and now there he was at the head of an army of fiendish demons. With his black armor on his back, Bloodthirster in his hand and an icy expression on his face, Tungdil seemed to have found his ideal setting. He *belonged*.

“But it can’t be,” Ireheart exclaimed, unable to take it in. “That’s not him! May Vraccas be my witness. *That* isn’t my Tungdil Goldhand!” He looked at Goda helplessly. “It’s not him,” he repeated as if he were trying to convince himself. “It’s a hallucination—a specter sent to scare us.” As his despair turned to fury he raised his crow’s beak, powerful rage getting the better of him again like in the old days. He was not about to resist the urge. “I’m going to smash it to pieces!”

This time it was Goda’s turn to calm him. “No, Boindil!” She faced him courageously, taking his face in her hands and staring into the brown eyes that flashed with madness and hot temper. “Hear my words, husband! This is not the time. We must get back to the fortress. Out here we’re...”

Her speech was swallowed by the crashing of the catapults. Stones, arrows and spears were hurtling from fortress platforms and battlements; they flew over the heads of ubariu and dwarves, darkening the winter sunlight and casting shadows on the handful of defenders by the gate, before finding their mark in the ravine.

Metallic clashes rang out as iron spears rained on shields or penetrated helmets and armor; then came the victims’ screams and the thud of missiles landing among the serried ranks of beasts. This was the very essence of battle, overlaid as it was with the intense smell of blood.

Goda knew this was only the beginning. Worse was to come. Soon the defending garrison would be adding their screams to the cacophony of death.

“Come with me,” she begged Ireheart, pressing a kiss on his brow as missiles flew overhead. Smoking firebrands were launched, hissing into the air to burst against the steep walls of the Black Abyss and drench the monsters and the raging kordrion with burning liquid.

Believing Boindil’s spasm of fury had subsided, Goda slackened her grip, but he pushed her aside and raced over to the enemy lines with a bloodcurdling yell and the crow’s beak raised high.

For the dwarf-woman this was all too fast—she tumbled to the ground. “No!” she shouted in her fright, trying in vain to hold him back. She turned. “Yagur, after him! Keep him safe!” she commanded. Without a moment’s hesitation, the ubariu leader charged after the general to give backup; no easy task given the enemy’s superior numbers.

Goda got to her feet and gathered her magic power so that she could help her husband from a distance.

Ireheart wasn’t thinking anymore.

He was seeing his world through a blood-red mask and the only spot in the whole scene that he could clearly distinguish was the hideous phantom impersonating his best friend, Tungdil. He was not going to allow this vile infamy to persist. *You must not be Tungdil! Not on their side!*

The ringing in his ears masked the noise of battle. He was so overcome with the need to destroy the phantom and then to hurl himself on the opposing forces that he could no longer think clearly. It was too much for a warrior like himself, whose hot blood surged through his veins like molten rock through underground tunnels. And he did not even want to control himself.

Some of the spears and arrows landed near him, falling short of their intended targets. The soldiers at Evildam were sticking to the letter of their commander's instructions, even if he himself was acting contrary to his own orders. He was seeking to engage the enemy on open ground instead of running for the fortress to repel the approaching army of beasts from the safety of the stronghold's mighty walls.

Ireheart found himself less than ten paces away from the enemy. They hadn't stirred from their positions and were waiting at the exit to the ravine.

Enemy reinforcements clambered out over the bodies of fallen comrades, putting out fires with sand and bone dust. As soon as one creature fell, another ghastly monster took its place. The chasm apparently held an endless number of them. It was a nest of horrors.

As far as Ireheart could see, they were keeping their distance from the false Tungdil figure, as if he were surrounded by an invisible dome of respect and awe. "Whatever you are, I'm going to wipe you out!" he yelled, and with an earsplitting cry of fury he swung the crow's beak high over his head.

The two blue eyes on the underside of the kordrion's muzzle focused on Ireheart for a moment and then turned on the black-armored form of Tungdil, who swiveled away from the fighting-mad Ireheart to face the gigantic monster, the runes on his armor glowing.

The kordrion screamed, and it sounded... afraid?

Before Boindil could reach him, Tungdil had leaped forward onto one of the monsters' corpses; he jumped onto another close by and used a thick spear jutting out of the body as a springboard to reach a position on top of a huge boulder. From there his path took him to the next boulder and the next until he had passed along to the head of the army as if on stepping stones in a stream. Now he was close to the kordrion's throat. The cowering beast recoiled, hissing sharply.

Unable to hold back the blow he'd been waiting to deliver, Ireheart released it against one of the monsters racing toward him. This one seemed like a cross between an oversize reptile and a very fat orc, with the arms of a gnome stuck on to its sides. But it was still wielding a sword and shield with aplomb.

The flat head of the crow's beak shattered both shield and thin arm holding it, then smashed right into the ribcage; the beast fell dead in the dust.

Ireheart held off his next adversaries by whirling his weapon round in circles, liberally dealing out injury and death among them. All the time he ensured that the supposed Tungdil remained in sight. He was steadfastly refusing to assume that it might yet be his battle companion from the past but his confidence was starting to fade. *What in the name of Vraccas is he up to?*

Suddenly Yagur and the other ubariu were at his side fighting evil's misbegotten monsters, which in spite of their superior numbers seemed to be holding back, awaiting the order to storm the fortress *en masse*. Only a few of the creatures were venturing to attack and they paid with their lives. Some arrows, meanwhile, glanced off the huge shields the ubariu carried while others were halted in mid-air, falling ineffectually to the ground. Goda's magic.

"We'll have to go back, General," Yagur insisted, as he sliced his opponent down the middle with a wild sword thrust; Yagur jabbed through the falling body to reach the next oncomer. The second ubariu patrol joined them, strengthening their numbers.

Ireheart looked up at the black-clad dwarf wielding Bloodthirster in both hands to attack the kordrion. The strangely shaped blade cut through the creature's putrid grayish skin to release a river

blood.

The kordrion emitted a roar that shook Ireheart to the core and almost paralyzed him. The thunder of the creature's mighty voice all but caused the work of battle to cease and the walls of the ravine shook under its reverberations.

Everything was still...

... apart from the dwarf in the dark tionium armor!

He clanged the visor on his helmet, not caring about the blood streaming over his head.

It is him after all! He was just waiting for the right moment to show us who he is! At the sight of the dwarf's face Ireheart could no longer doubt this was his best friend returning at last to his side. He had missed him so badly. He wanted nothing more than to believe that this was Tungdil. The heroic and selfless conduct displayed in the assault on the kordrion was typical of the dwarf who had triumphed in the past in so many battles for Girdlegard. And there was probably a very good explanation to account for Tungdil's completely different set of armor—armor that reminded Ireheart of Djerûn. Time for all that later. Now for the fight!

But when, next moment, Tungdil was bathed in the kordrion's white fire and swallowed up by bright flames, Boëndil gave up the hero for lost. He knew exactly what those flames would do, even though his experience of them had been over two hundred and fifty cycles previously. Even if the tionium withstood the fire, the heat inside the armor would roast the wearer alive. He remembered finding the body of his twin brother...

"No!" Ireheart bellowed in despair, hacking through helmet and skull of another enemy with the curved end of the crow's beak. There was a crack and then the sharp point appeared again through the breastbone under the throat. Boëndil hurled the creature to the ground, placing his right foot on its shoulders to pull the weapon back out through the ugly face. "Vraccas, don't let me have found him only to lose him again so soon."

The ball of fire spread and swelled to form a cloud in which a black shape could be seen. Tungdil seemed to have survived!

The black-armored dwarf had sunk onto one knee. He held Bloodthirster protecting his face, his other arm at his back. As the flames ebbed away he sprang up and stabbed at the lower eyes of the kordrion, taking it by surprise.

Tungdil managed to hit one of the eyes. It sounded like a leather wine pouch bursting.

Bluish liquid poured out, swiftly followed by a stream of dark-red blood. Veins and sinews tumbled out as thick as a man's arm; more liquid fountained out of the wound and the creature convulsed with pain.

Ireheart couldn't believe his eyes: Spraying blood from a gash in its side and the injury on its head, the kordrion was slinking back into the ravine!

The enormous feet squashed dozens of monsters, pressing them into the ground. Bodily juices squirted out in all directions. Then it was gone, leaving a wet trail on the rocks. A final flurry of arrows and spears accompanied it to its lair, then the stronghold catapults fell silent.

Quiet returned, so that the sound of the wind along the battlements and on the slopes of the Black Abyss—not heard amid the noise of battle—was loud in comparison.

Ireheart commanded the ubariu to watch the murky path down into the chasm while he stepped forward, lowering his blood-smeared crow's beak.

He gestured to the armored dwarf to come down. "Show yourself, so that I may see if you are an old friend or a new enemy," he called out. He could not control his excitement, but was yo-yoing between joy and suspicion, his belief that this might be his old companion not quite being enough in

itself to convince him.

Trumpets blared from the battlements, the great gate was opened and an army of two hundred dwarves and undergroundlings issued out under Goda's command. They took up their positions behind Ireheart and the ubariu and waited. Ready to fight.

The dwarf that was possibly Tungdil sprang down with remarkable agility, belying the weight of his armor, then ran along the stepping stones until he reached ground level. As he jumped down, a cloud of white dust rose, covering the black metal knee protectors. He held Bloodthirster in his right hand, with the blade resting up against his shoulder. Step by step he approached the band of warriors. The helmet stayed shut.

Boïndil gulped in apprehension, his throat dry. "Visor up!" he barked, his right hand flexing in readiness around the handle of the crow's beak. The leather grip creaked. "I want to see your face by daylight." Behind him the dwarves were raising their weapons, as the armored figure continued on his way, impervious to the command.

Now Ireheart could see the armor clearly. It was covered in runic signs and symbols he had never come across before.

A quick glance at Goda told him that the maga was equally bemused. She shook her head briefly, unable to interpret the meaning of the glimmering silver inlay or engravings any more than he could.

What bothered Boïndil was that there was no hint there of allegiance to Vraccas or of any dwarf origins, even if the suit of armor itself had unquestionably come from the hand of a child of the Smith. The work of a dwarf-master smith indeed.

Would Tungdil do that? Would he deny his own people? "Stand and show yourself!" he ordered resolutely, lifting his weapon. "If you are Tungdil Goldhand, show us your face. Otherwise..." Ireheart whirled his crow's beak round his head "... otherwise I shall smash your face in still inside the helmet!"

The other dwarf stopped in his tracks. Legs wide apart in a supremely confident stance he faced the gathered force, then—in a movement that was neither hasty nor frightened—his left hand went slowly up to his helmet. Bit by bit the dark grating was soundlessly lifted.

Boïndil was breathless with anticipation, his heart pounding. *Vraccas, let the miracle have happened!* he begged, closing his eyes to make the prayer to his god more fervent still. It was all he could do to open them again in order to look at the face before him. Hearing Goda's sharp intake of breath didn't make things easier.

At last he dared open his eyes.

He saw a short brown beard surrounding the familiar features of a dwarf who had certainly aged. But this was a face he would have known among a thousand.

The left eye was hidden behind an engraved patch of pure gold held in place with gold thread. The remaining brown eye was focused steadily on Boïndil. In that gaze Ireheart saw curiosity, little joy and... something else he could not fathom.

Visible through the beard the lines around the mouth and nose had grown deeper and gave the dwarf's face an authoritative air that many a dwarf-king would have envied. There was a scar running up the forehead from above the right eye and disappearing under the helmet—healed over, but very dark.

Ireheart gave a deep sigh. It definitely looked like his old friend standing before him once more. He took a step forward, but thought he could sense rejection from Tungdil.

"What sort of evidence do you want to prove I'm Tungdil Goldhand?" he asked, loosening the chin strap and tugging the helmet off the shock of shoulder-length brown hair. The scar on the brow went

all the way up to the crown. Tungdil cast the helmet down on the ground and shook off a gauntlet to show the golden mark on his hand. “Touch it, if you like, Boëndil. It’s my everlasting souvenir from the battle for the throne of the high king, although I never really had a claim to it.” He stretched out his hand in challenge.

Ireheart passed his fingers across the yellow-gold spot on the palm, then looked enquiringly into Tungdil’s countenance.

The dwarf smiled and *it was the old smile!* The familiar smile he had so longed to see once more.

“Perhaps I should tell you how you tried to make me believe that the best way to seduce a dwarf-girl was to rub them from head to toe in stinky cheese?” He leaned forward with a wink. “I never use the method. Did you need it with Goda?”

The maga laughed out loud.

“So it’s really you!” exclaimed Ireheart. He dropped the crow’s beak, and pulled Tungdil into his open arms. “By Vraccas, it’s really you!” he exclaimed, his eyes stinging with tears. Nothing could stop the flood of emotion. Such was his joy as he hugged Tungdil that he failed to notice the embrace was not being returned.

Tearing himself loose from Tungdil, Boëndil turned to the dwarves watching him with bated breath. “See!” he called enthusiastically, raising his head so that his words might carry to the battlements at Evildam. “See, our hero has returned! Girdlegard will soon be free of the yoke of manifold evil!” He tapped the black armor. “Ho, Lohasbrand, Lot-Ionan and all the rest of Tion’s cursed issue; expect no mercy now—there’s no escape for you!”

Goda was radiant and wiped tears of joy and relief from her eyes. The dwarf-warriors behind her stared in deepest respect at the hero most knew only from hearsay. A legendary figure had returned to them and had, moreover, just seen off the most terrifying monster ever to emerge from the Black Abyss.

The garrison at the fortress had heard Boëndil’s announcement. Drums and trumpets filled the air, heralding the news through a special melody composed specifically in anticipation of the long-awaited orbit when Tungdil would return. All should learn that the day had come.

Ireheart grinned: “I can imagine some will be thinking the trumpeters have got the fanfare wrong and were intending to send out quite a different set of orders.” He thumped Tungdil heartily on the shoulder and couldn’t wipe the smile off his face. “Let’s go into the fortress and forget about the Black Abyss for now. It’s time to bid you properly welcome. You’ll have to tell us what you’ve been up to, all these long, long cycles. And we’ll have a lot to fill you in on, too.” He bent down to pick up Tungdil’s helmet and gauntlet. Looking him straight in the eye, he told him, “You’ve no idea how happy I am to see you, Scholar.”

Tungdil took his things and half turned, still watching the Black Abyss. “They’ll be back, you know, Ireheart. I took the kordrion by surprise; as soon as its wounds are healed it’ll come creeping out of its hiding place again. And word will soon get around that the barrier has lost its strength. The monsters will form an army and break out again...”

Boëndil pointed up at the massive walls of the stronghold. “That’s why we’ve got the fortress and why we called it Evildam,” he interrupted. “They won’t escape, not a single ugly one of them. And we’ll spike the kordrion all over with our heaviest spears till it looks like a hedgehog and collapses, dead.” He looked over proudly to Goda. “She is now a maga. Our strongest weapon.”

The dwarf-woman had taken a step forward and Tungdil observed her with a strange look in his eye. “You will need her,” he said quietly, looking back at the cleft in the rocks.

Ireheart smiled. “We are more than confident, Scholar. Now you are with us again, nothing can

frighten the children of the Smith.” He set off, and the crowd of ubariu, undergroundlings and dwarf-warriors drew back to form a guard of honor to let them pass.

Goda stared at Tungdil as he passed. She had the impression that he didn’t recognize her. His one brown eye had shown no reaction when he had looked her way. *And he never once asked about Sirka*, she said to herself, her face clouding over. Even if her husband was a pushover, bathed in joy and nostalgia as he was, she was going to be harder to convince. Suspicion had taken hold in her mind.

Goda followed them and the warriors stood guard while they withdrew into the stronghold behind the mighty doors. In the coming orbits, she decided, she would subject this dwarf, whom everyone seemingly held to be Tungdil Goldhand, to closer examination. Even as they entered the fortress to the accompaniment of triumphant fanfares and the acclaim of the troops, she was busy thinking up questions, because if the evil had sent them a false Tungdil there was unquestionably something terrible in store for them all.

Keeping her eyes on Tungdil’s suit of black armor with the mysterious engravings, the dwarf-mag became more and more sure with every step she took that this was not their old friend they were welcoming here. They were letting evil into their midst and were celebrating its arrival!

She looked right and left and up to the towers, where shouts of wild rejoicing could be heard, loud enough to prevent any conversation.

Goda realized she seemed to be the only one in the fortress worried about this Tungdil figure. All the rest were in ecstasy because—despite his not having spoken a single word to them—they were convinced their long-awaited champion had returned to rid them of the evil.

She sighed, and her gaze drifted over to where Yagur, the ubariu leader, stood—and she recognized a similar concern on his face.

*Girdlegard,
Former Queendom of Weyurn,
Mifurdania,
Winter, 6491st Solar Cycle*

“And here, highly esteemed spectators, *here* at my left at the end, we have another legitimate descendant of the unique, incomparable and, for countless decades, never bettered, Incredible Rodario!” announced the man in opulent white attire standing on the same stage that normally saw service for executions. If you looked carefully you could still see the odd tuft of hair stuck in dried blood in the notches on the block. Nobody minded.

Or rather, nobody was allowed to mind.

There was not an inch of space in the square in front of the theater known as the *New Curiosum*. The covered tribune for the nobles and rich merchants or other privileged burghers was also filled to capacity.

Only the tribune’s first row, reserved for selected notables, was still empty. Such dignitaries seldom if ever came to lighthearted events like this, preferring public beheadings, and the punishments and humiliation ordeals usually meted out here.

A pretty young woman sat in the second row. She had bright tawny orange eyes and, covered by a flimsy veil, beautiful black hair reaching down to her waist. She wore a mantle of black wolf fur

wrapped round her and held a cup of mulled wine.

Round the edges of the square, stalls were selling various comestibles ranging from hot sausages and sliced pork to waffles and sweet chestnuts in cream. If anyone was cold they could grab a warm beer or a hot mug of wine, served with honey or spiced to taste. White clouds of steam rose from the many stoves in the market booths and there was music and song coming from the inn.

The young woman smiled as she inhaled all these smells. At last there was a reason to be cheerful rare enough in these times of occupation by Lohasbrand and his henchmen.

“Is there anything else you’d like, Princess Coïra?” asked her companion, who was of an age to have been perhaps a brother. Under his open brown fur coat he wore leather armor, and a short sword hung at his side. His hair was hidden by a flat padded woolen cap that gave him a harmless appearance. That was the intention.

“Yes, I’d like you not to use that title,” she hissed, flashing her eyes in reproach. “You know what they’ll do to you if they hear you addressing me like that, Loytan.”

Her companion scanned the empty front bench. “There’s nobody here to take me to task for speaking the truth,” he answered quietly but firmly. “You *are* the princess and your mother would be queen of Weyurn but for the accursed Dragon...”

Coïra placed her hand over his mouth. “Be quiet! You’re risking your life, talking like that! They have eyes and ears everywhere!”

In her mind she could see her mother, imprisoned in her own palace, the Ring of Shame around her neck. Every hour of the orbit she was watched, humiliated and robbed of her authority. If the Dragon decided she should die, his servants would pull the ring tight to strangle her slowly until she suffocated. The princess sighed. “Look at the stage and enjoy what the Incredible Rodario’s descendants have to offer us this time, when they choose their best competitor.”

Loytan smiled obediently and turned toward the stage.

The master of ceremonies was pointing his cane to the end of the line. There were no less than eleven men and six women this cycle.

They were all dressed in showy and extravagantly tailored garments. The fabrics chosen were, one and all, scintillating and amazingly brightly colored. And yet the clothes had been selected in each case—coats, dresses, hats and boots—expressly to make each competitor stand out from the others.

The only one who didn’t conform to type was the fellow at the end of the line.

He was the only one the tailor had provided with togs that didn’t fit. Or perhaps he was standing so poorly that everything he wore seemed to crease and sag in the wrong places.

As appropriate for a descendant of the Incredible Rodario, he had brown hair, worn to his shoulders, and a good bone structure, but his cheeks were rather plump and this detracted from the promise of aristocratic features. The goatee beard, a distinctive mark of the original Incredible Rodario, founder of whole dynasties of renowned actors in many regions of Girdlegard, was disappointingly wispy and badly groomed.

“He calls himself—and I admit it’s one of the more predictable choices—Rodario the Seventh! Applause, if you will!” The master of ceremonies raised his arms to encourage the audience, but the clapping was sporadic and died away quickly.

“By all the gods,” said Loytan, amused. “What a miserable figure he makes in the midst of all those peacocks! He won’t even get a consolation prize.”

“I think it’s... quite clever,” Coïra said in defense. She felt some sympathy for this particular descendant of Rodario. He bore a certain tragic charm. “He’s... different.”

“He’s definitely different.” Loytan laughed out loud. “In my opinion he’ll be the first of the last

again. Shall we have a bet, Princess?" He smiled at her happily, then something caught his eye just past her and his expression lost its merriment.

A broad shadow fell over them; Coïra swirled round in fear.

Behind them, four of the Lohasbrander henchmen had entered the tribune unnoticed and were making their way to the first row. They had heavy armor hung with discs of metal under their cloaks and their helmets were in the form of a dragon with folded wings. Each wore an amulet on a silver chain—a dark-green dragon scale, the sign of undisputed power in Weyurn. Thus they outranked all except for their master.

Coïra leaned forward searching the crowd in the square until she located the orcs. They belonged to the Lohasbranders and were their devoted servants. There they were, hanging out in one of the side streets, stuffing their faces. Because of the cold, the meat they were eating was steaming. Coïra didn't want to know whether it was freshly stewed or just very fresh.

The man at the front grinned at Loytan. He was fat and muscular at the same time; his broad face sported a light blond beard. "Did I just hear you say something you'd better have left unsaid? You know the law, Count Loytan of Loytansberg. It holds even for nobility like yourself. Or especially for nobility like yourself." He gathered a mouthful of saliva and spat at the young man. "But I'll overlook it for now. I don't want to spoil the atmosphere." He thumped down the steps to take his place straight in front, so that his helmet spoiled Loytan's view of the stage. "I recommend that you are no longer there when I get up to go. If you're still there I shall be implementing the orders of Master Lohasbrand." His comrades laughed as they took their seats.

"Here comes the first round, ladies and gentlemen. You love this part of the contest," announced the man in white. "It's the quick-fire slander session that starts here in Mifurdania, where the Incredible Rodario had his theater for so long." He surveyed the audience, hands on hips. "I can see from quite a few of your faces that your great-grannies used to enjoy going to the *Curiosum*, but going *backstage*, of course, I mean."

The crowd loved it.

Coïra restrained Loytan's hand, which had wandered to the sword at his belt. "Don't," she whispered urgently.

He was shaking with anger. "But..."

"You might get him, but the orcs will finish off your entire family. The Dragon will punish everyone, not just the individual—have you forgotten that?" Coïra took her handkerchief to remove the globule of green spit from Loytan's face, but he turned aside and wiped it on his own sleeve.

"One day nothing will save him from me," Loytan growled.

The woman released her hold. The danger was over for the moment. "Leave rebellion to others," she said quietly. "To those who don't have families."

He turned his eyes to the stage again. "You mean leave it to that cowardly rhymester?"

"He's a proper *poet*, not just a ballad writer, and he's certainly not cowardly. The writings he puts on Weyurn's doors at night have done more to change things than any sword or arrow." Coïra had noted the jealousy in Loytan's voice, but it was quite unfounded. Loytan already had a wife of his own and Coïra regarded him more as a big brother and protector. She had so far not met anyone to whom she could give her heart and her innocence.

"What he writes brings only death to those that read and follow it," Loytan retorted promptly. "I can see the tufts of hair stuck in the blood. The poor wretches had their heads cut off for demanding freedom for the kingdom and for your mother."

"One more word from you, Loytansberg," threatened the Lohasbrander in front of them, "and

you'll be the next candidate for the block. Enough of your stupid nonsense. Keep your mouth shut or I'll make sure you never open it again." His comrades laughed.

Loytan snorted and grabbed his cup of wine, drowning his response in it.

The master of ceremonies continued, "So let the proceedings commence and let the insults fly. Sons and daughters of Rodario, let's hear what you're capable of."

A young woman was the first to take the stage. She'd stuck on a large mustache and goatee beard, and stepped to the front with an exaggeratedly masculine gait. Standing there, she stroked her artificial facial hair and tapped herself proudly on the codpiece. Her gestures took a rise out of all the men and the audience roared with laughter.

Abruptly she tore off the false beard. "Oh, trapping of man's vanity—away with you!" she cried. "I'm Ladenia and I'm a woman, as you can plainly see, but I'll be more of a man than the rest of you." With an impudent grin on her face she walked along past the other Rodarios until she reached The Incomparable One. "They told me you wanted the title and had the best chance because you were so good-looking." She emphasized the word and fluttered her lashes, "Because you are so clever" (here she placed her hand at her own brow) "and because you sleep with most of the women in the town and they'll all be voting for you." She laughed. "But I can see more men than women in the audience: I was better than you!"

The crowd yelled out and laughed.

"You all know the joke about the orc asking the dwarf for directions, but I know one that's much funnier," Ladenia told them. "How many of these useless Rodarios does it take to lift up an orc?"

The Lohasbrander leaned forward expectantly, his left hand raised.

Coïra looked over to where the greenskins were standing. They'd stopped chewing and had drawn their weapons. There was a catastrophe about to happen. As soon as the Lohasbrander completed the signal he was giving they would come charging across the square and put a stop to the show. Just because of a single joke. Ladenia had no idea what she was doing.

"So, what do you think?" continued the woman on the stage. "What's the matter? Does nobody dare to say?"

Coïra was trying to think how she could distract the Lohasbranders without putting herself in danger. It would be difficult because the Dragon's men would be delighted to have an opportunity to arrest the daughter of the rightful sovereign.

She was opening her mouth to say something harmless, when Ladenia supplied the punch line. "I tell you then: five. Four to hold him fast and one to dig a hole, because otherwise you couldn't get the orc's feet off the ground. None of the weaklings would be able to take the weight."

Coïra saw the corner of the Lohasbrander's mouth twitch. He dropped his arm. It wasn't an insult that had to be punished. It wasn't even a good joke.

Ladenia realized this herself when a leaden silence fell over the audience. She hastily executed a few nifty dancing steps, circled round and then sang a song until the announcer came up and pushed her back.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we've seen that at least this female descendant of the great man can't hold out much hope of the title," he said, laughing at her performance. "She's shown us there's not much difference between singing and pain."

The man earned laughter for his cutting words and he invited the next contestant to step forward.

One after another they took the floor, launching viciously satirical attacks on their fellow contenders for the title of "Worthiest Successor of the Incredible Rodario," the most scurrilous contributions being greeted with uproarious applause; only three contestants attempted black humor

even wit, and they did not go down so well with the audience.

Coïra followed what was happening on stage, but kept her eye on the orcs and the Lohasbranders at the same time. She would have liked to be able to enjoy the performances, but the presence of the hated occupying forces spoiled any pleasure she might have taken. As long as she could remember, they had always been there in the background, the ones who served the Dragon.

She had never seen the Dragon itself, but she'd noted the fear in the faces of the oldest inhabitants of Weyurn when the subject of the winged monster came up. When it first appeared in Weyurn two hundred and fifty cycles ago, the Dragon had laid waste to the kingdom with his white fire and had forced the queen to leave her throne. Wey the Fifth had subjected herself to the Dragon's rule, not out of cowardice but in order to protect her people.

After that it had been the orcs, the Dragon's henchmen, who had come to keep watch on activities in the provinces on his behalf. Humans, too, had turned up, willing to serve the Scaly One. These humans gave rise to the present day Lohasbranders, Weyurn's nobility, devoid of decency or dignity.

Coïra knew that Lohasbrand was intent on taking over the rest of Girdlegard, in order to fill its legendary hoard in the Red Mountains with yet more treasures, but there were too many rivals. Rumor had it that the four enemies had agreed an armistice, but she didn't think this would be long-lasting. Lohasbrand had extended his sphere of influence until he came up against Lot-Ionan and the kordrion. He'd be sure to make a further attempt soon. She reckoned that was why the guards holding her mother had seemed particularly nervous recently.

Coïra craned her neck to watch the guy calling himself The Incomparable: A good-looking man of about twenty cycles, and the spitting image of the original Rodario, judging from pictures. "He ought to win," she told Loytan. "He's got style."

"And absolutely no chance of success," he cut in. "Don't you hear what the plebs are calling for? They want mockery and spite, not clever words and convoluted sentences where you can never tell where the meaning is going."

Coïra leaned forward in her seat to have a closer look at the actor of her choice. "Where's he from?"

Loytan consulted one of the flyers that had been handed out. "Here we are, *Rodario the Incomparable*. He's from the next-door kingdom of Tabaîn. He apparently runs a theater there and appears in Gauragar and Idoslane on tour." He looked at the man. "Good figure of a man. For an actor."

That was exactly what Coïra was thinking. In her imagination he was taking on the persona of the unknown poet who held the occupying forces up to ridicule and scorn and was encouraging the people of Mifurdania to rebel against the Dragon and the Lohasbranders, reminding them there had been a time when their nation had not been oppressed and forced to pay tribute in this way. And he gave them hope for a future in which they would again be free of fear.

He represented a danger to the Lohasbranders and the orcs. He was held to be responsible for at least thirteen killings. It was not just a sharp tongue he wielded.

The Incomparable One from Tabaîn exactly fitted her idea of the unknown poet, on whose head a price was set—a price large enough to keep a hundred Weyurn citizens in comfort until the end of their days; be that as it may, no one had tried to denounce him to the Dragon yet.

Now it was the turn of Rodario the Seventh to win over the crowd with his ready wit. But the very way he moved when he stepped to the front of the stage was enough to tell the audience this was going to be embarrassing. Horribly embarrassing.

"Oy, lad," someone called out. "Hope you've rehearsed a bit this time, or we'll have you back in

the tar barrel and cover you with sawdust!”

“Or dunk you in the privy,” came a second voice. “Then at least you’ll be the champion when it comes to stinking.”

The people laughed and the hecklers were applauded. The white-clad master of ceremonies called for quiet. “Let him make a fool of himself without being interrupted, ladies and gentlemen,” he said with a smirk. “At least he has shown us every cycle so far that he’s really good at that.” He pointed at the Seventh Rodario with his cane. “We’re waiting!”

Coïra hoped for his sake for some distraction to prevent him starting his performance. A lightning strike, a snowstorm, even maybe a house catching fire. She looked at Loytan, who grinned and stood up in order to hear better and see over the Lohasbrander’s helmet.

“Behold the handsome Uncompared…” he started with a quivering voice, and the audience in the front row were chortling already.

“Excuse me, but the name is *The Incomparable*,” corrected the man himself. His interruption was friendly but assured. “Start again.”

The Seventh Rodario cleared his throat but sounded more like a woman than a man when he spoke. “Behold the handsome Incomparable,” he said, addressing his rival, who gave him a friendly wave and made a winding-up gesture to indicate he should speed up. However, The Seventh suddenly lost all the color from his cheeks. “But like that it won’t rhyme with the next line,” he said, horrified. He scratched his beard feverishly. “What shall I do?”

The audience were in stitches.

Coïra sighed and pitied his senseless courage. He’d be leaving the competition in humiliation and disgrace—and next cycle he’d be on stage again.

Rodario the Seventh went red. The laughter brought him to his senses and he clenched his fists. “There he stands, all long and tall,” he shouted above the noise of the throng. “But he’ll be feeling ever so small. When he sees my act. And that’s a fact.” He gave a hurried bow to the audience and stepped back to join the other contestants.

Loytan looked at Coïra and laughed. “Was that it? That can’t have been the whole performance?”

“I think maybe it was.” She looked at her hero, The Incomparable One, who was grinning to himself. He was enjoying his victory quietly, not making a triumph out of it. This endeared him to her even more. She was surprised to find her heart beating wildly when she looked at him.

People started chucking rotten vegetables and snowballs at Rodario the Seventh. He put up with it just like he endured the catcalls and abuse.

The Incomparable stepped forward unexpectedly and raised his arms. “Stop that!” he ordered the crowd. “He doesn’t deserve to be treated like that. He may not be a word-acrobat and he may not be the best-looking, but he’s still a descendant of the great man himself. Same as me.”

“Are you sure of that?” yelled a woman.

The Incomparable had made her out straightaway and pointed. “Who are you to poke fun at him?” he rebuked her. He no longer had a genial air about him. “You can’t even read or write, can you?”

“It’s enough if I can see and hear this idiot!” she countered. Her response was greeted with renewed laughter.

Rodario looked at his defender, who was just about to make a barbed retort. “Let it go,” he said, smiling sadly. “She’s right, after all.” He brushed the rotten lettuce leaves from his shoulders onto the floor, and shook the bits of ice out of his hair. “I’m as bad at this as ever.”

“Stand tall, you’re a descendant of the Incredible Rodario!” said The Incomparable. In a dramatic gesture he whirled around, swinging his wide mantle effectively—and as he did so some papers fell

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