



Call of the Dragon, Part I

by Marc H. Wyman & Chris Bogues

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“You want me to fight a woman?!”

Boragger, the burly, seven feet tall chief bodyguard, laughed. “Yes, Nych, and I’m looking forward to seeing you grovel at her feet.”

The man addressed as Nych jerked back in disgust. A proper reaction for a man garbed in leather cured from the hide of the giant thymbair, wearing a long shirt tied in the waist by a dark strap and simple leggings below. His boots still bore the grizzled fur of the thymbair, much too warm for the hot city of Chazevo. An amulet to the war god of Keshmire hang around his chest, beautifully crafted from bronze. His face, though, looked considerably less barbarian, being of a noble cut, with a prominent nose below bright, gray eyes. His hair was long and blond – and yet, if one looked closely at the roots, dark brown traces were visible.

Nobody at the court of the merchant Ceravin Tangrain had questioned Nych’s barbarian origin ever since the man appeared well over two months ago. Cornell of Cayaboré was proud of his disguise as a warrior from the steppes of the distant south – the land of Robhovard -, of the tribe of Ryelneyd, down to the behavior and idiosyncrasies typical of this people. Long enough had he traveled with a friend from that very tribe to know that even a person familiar with the Ryelneyd could not find fault with him.

“*That* will never happen,” he now said haughtily, drawing his sword from its sheath. Beautiful steel, the bastard sword glinted in the light of the afternoon sunlight breaking through the glass windows of the forehall.

A smile was Boragger’s only reply while he heaved his massive body, also weighed down by a thick, dark vest of armor, to the elfwood doors leading into Tangrain’s main hall. The chief guard smashed his hand against the door. Moments later, the valves swiveled open, silently moving in their greased grooves and opened to an opulent sight.

No windows were set in the walls, yet plentiful light streamed from magical tubular lamps at the roof. Rich carpets on the floor, gobelins interchanging with oil paintings on the walls. In a square near the entrance, boards of light wood were placed over the carpet – a fighting arena which Tangrain rarely bothered to remove. The sides of the arena were lined by men wearing the same dark vests as Boragger. Their faces ranged from the swarthy of the Elfadil sandmen to the light skin tones of the Albinavian humans. Some were not quite human, either. Pale blue skin, slightly pointed ears denoted elves, and the nasty curvature of their mouths proved it beyond a doubt.

Beyond were stands holding some of the treasures Tangrain had amassed, and some that he was dealing in. Jewels of all kinds, arrayed on silk, next to the wares from Modayre, the source of the merchant's wealth – and also the reason why Cornell had been sent to Chazevo.

A barbarian, though, would never let his gaze rest long on the unassuming weaponry and tools, he knew, and looked ahead to the far end of the hall. Two golden statues stood tall enough to scrape at the roof; one depicting a bearded, scholarly man bearing a scroll in one hand and a pen in the other, the other statue showing a striking woman in a flowing robe, her long hair surrounding her head like a corona. Darawk, the god of knowledge; Alyssa, the goddess of love. Between the statues, Tangrain sat on a wide chair before a large table. He was a small man, lean enough to be called haggard, a nervous twitch in his eyes that never vanished. He was unremarkably dressed, might have disappeared in any – well to do – crowd in Chazevo, which was exactly the way the merchant liked to appear. The man next to him might have worn dark, unprepossessing clothes as well, yet this person would never vanish in a crowd. Unless the crowd was made up of full-blooded elves, with blue, almost purplish skin and eyes of a color bordering on white. Cornell hadn't seen this man before, but unfortunately he had no time to ponder the elf's presence further.

"Move it," Boragger growled. "The lady is waiting."

Indeed she was. Cornell had met her a few times before, and as before he couldn't help his heart missing a beat when he saw Sylasa in front of the statue of Alyssa. The warrior woman was from Ibrollene, five and a half feet tall. She wore silvery chain armor so intricately forged that the chains seemed to flow into one another, comforting her ample curves, and moving as easily as silk with every motion. Magic, the Cayaborean supposed. Well, against a strong and skilled fighter such as he, it would at best level the playing field.

Boragger and Cornell walked into the center of the arena. At a sign of Tangrain's, Sylasa nodded and sauntered over to them, her hips moving in a most pleasing way. It took all of Cornell's effort not to be caught by the hypnotic sway – though Boragger, for one, felt no inhibition of the kind. And Sylasa seemed not to be bothered by this attention. Her eyes were firmly trained on Cornell, bearing a sparkling challenge.

"So, pretty boy," she said, "ready to prove yourself a man?"

Laughter erupted from the guards. Sylasa basked in the mirth, smiling ever so sweetly – yet the Cayaborean warrior suddenly knew that the woman used the display only as a disguise to put her enemy at ease.

Boragger grinned and bowed to her. "Show him what he's made of, lady." The grin quickly vanished, replaced by a grim look to Cornell. "Drop the sword, you won't be using it. Wouldn't want to damage the goods. Not seriously, anyway."

"Particularly such sweet ones," Sylasa purred, flashing a disconcerting glance at Cornell. Then, one of the elves threw her a quarterstaff which she caught in a swift motion and whirled once about her body, all sweetness wiped from her face.

Quarterstaffs? Cornell suppressed a curse as he handed his sword to Boragger and looked about to receive a staff himself. His first mistake, he quickly realized, as Sylasa's quarterstaff jabbed towards his chest.

He instinctively ducked, jammed his – empty – shield arm forward – and found that Sylasa was standing a lot further away than a swordfighting foe would. Instead of pushing her away with a shield, her staff crashed into his back, knocking the air from his lungs. Cornell was stunned for a moment, just enough to get his feet swiped from under him by another blow.

Hurled backward, he fell on his behind – and on a second quarterstaff. Sylasa came at him again, just as Cornell twisted sideways, pressed close to the ground. Her staff missed him by inches, she had to take a sudden leap not to stumble over him. At that point Cornell grabbed the staff and heaved it upward, slamming it into Sylasa's midsection.

She groaned, but Cornell knew that much of the blow's force was cushioned by her armor. And he had no intention to let himself be bested by a woman! So he jabbed the staff sideways at her legs. She fell, just as he had done moments earlier.

To his surprise, Sylasa rolled off on her back – and used the roll's momentum to bring up her own quarterstaff, firing a stinging blow at his thigh. Again Cornell needed a moment to get his bearings, then he swung his staff for a forceful attack.

His staff was blocked firmly, then Sylasa launched a counter-attack which Cornell parried just as firmly. For a few moments they exchanged blows coolly, blocking easily. He was getting a feel back for the quarterstaff, began to remember the lessons of his youth seeping into his bones. Despite the aches in his body, he smiled. "Let's see who's in charge around here, lady," he gasped – then he jumped sideways, avoiding her blow, and planted the end of the quarterstaff into the ground.

His own force carried him into the air, his legs swirled out and connected with her chest solidly. Sylasa was knocked back, her grip on the staff loosened for a moment. Just what Cornell needed! He landed on his feet, followed the motion through with his arms and hammered the quarterstaff into the warrior woman. Elation surged through him, as he kicked the staff from her hands.

She lay on her back, staring at him in astonishment.

Cornell had an urge to help her gallantly back up, but he remembered his guise as a barbarian. Therefore he planted his boot on her stomach and yelled impatiently at Boragger, "Is that it? That girl is no match for a true warrior!"

He frowned when all he saw around him were faces grinning in anticipation.

"Really, pretty boy?" Sylasa whispered from the ground – and the next thing Cornell knew was that his groin imploded under her knee.

The Cayaborean stumbled a step back, held on to his quarterstaff with the last remnants of rational thought. It did him little good since Sylasa had whirled up from the ground at twice the speed she had shown before. A hurricane of quarterstaff blows landed on him, expertly placed to keep him balanced and ready to receive the next strike.

Even had he been fresh and unimpeded by the pain, he would have had a hard time matching Sylasa's fleetness. Now, he could only accept the barrage and suffer through the pain.

Finally, Sylasa stopped. Cornell wavered for a moment, then he dropped to the floor, expecting a final blow to put him into unconsciousness. Instead she rolled him over with her boot so that he looked up at her. Other than the triumphant pose he had assumed brief moments earlier, Sylasa held the tip of her quarterstaff against his throat, clear warning not to try any tricks of his own.

"Who's the boss, pretty boy?" she asked, a sweet, honest smile painted on her lips. "Well?"

"I... yield," he muttered.

Cheers went out from the guards around them, a few jeers directed at the "barbarian" – but they were shortcut by a sudden flash of light that raced like a wave through the main hall!

The quarterstaff vanished from Cornell's throat, and instead he suddenly felt Sylasa grasping his arms and hauling him up with amazing strength. He blinked, felt his staff pressed into his hands, then he saw that all faces – and incidentally numerous weapons – were directed at the entrance, just as a second ring of light washed over them.

The door had been closed, now the valves were slowly moving open. Two men entered. One was in his late fifties, to be sure, judging by the salt-and-pepper hair and beard, wearing the tan jacket of a Darawk scholar over a maroon robe. The other man was much younger, about the same age as Cornell's twenty-five years. He wore a journeyman's clothes; leather breeches, shirt and a brightly embroidered vest. His hair was short cropped black, his face was narrow and managed to look at the same time openly friendly as it maintained a weasely quality.

Seeing the face made Cornell's heart skip again – but certainly not because of joy. "Barandas," he whispered and hoped fervently that his oldest friend would not look in his direction.

"Thank you, my boy," the Darawk scholar now said to Barandas, then called out to Tangrain, "Playing your games again, Ceravin? You do know that there are other forms of entertainment available in Chazevo?"

The guards relaxed, Boragger shrugged, annoyed and turned away from the entrance, having ascertained that there was no danger, after all. Cornell knew differently, but the danger to him was quite unique. So he took a step sideways, hoping to lose himself among the faces of the other guards when he suddenly felt Sylasa's hand on his arm. "Stay ready, pretty boy," she whispered. "The young one is a wizard. Never trust a wizard"

Yes, sure he is, but a lousy one, Cornell nearly answered. Instead he hefted the quarterstaff closer and moved back to her side, feeling oddly elated. She had just beaten him, hadn't she? The pain all over his body was proof enough to him, and yet she told him to...

At that point Barandas' gaze fell onto the two solitary figures in the arena, and a merry smile spread over his face as he opened his mouth to greet his friend.

Oh, rats! Cornell cursed.



“Wizard!” he hollered and sprinted toward the stunned Barandas, whirling his quarterstaff into a striking position.

“Hold it, you fool!” Boragger cried – and a lightning bolt suddenly scorched the ground right before Cornell. Startled and shocked, Cornell stumbled over his own feet and fell forward, wondering when Barandas had graduated beyond light shows.

He hadn’t, as Cornell realized a few moments later. Boragger stood at the side of the arena, pointing a massive metal object at him, a long rod of some two feet, attached by skeleton-like fingers of dark metal to a casing around Boragger’s right arm, tendrils leading into his hand. Markings cobwebbed the gleaming, dark surface; odd, intricate, arcane, snaking up to the front – shaped as a gaping dragon maw, the beginning glimmer of fire smoldering in the back of its throat.

A dragon rod. The mystic weapon from Modayre.

So Tangrain did have one of them, just as Cornell’s superiors in Cayaboré had assumed. Despite his situation, a slight smile sneaked onto his lips.

“Please forgive this mishap, honored sage,” Tangrain called over from his chair – or rather, a few feet in front of it, since he had jumped up and now was slowly returning to his seat. “Just a... young fool who has no knowledge of the civilized world.”

Barandas was too irritated to say a word. The scholar next to him just sighed, unperturbed, and began to walk forward. “Dear Ceravin, the level of *your* civilization is still being questioned by the learned. Here, young fellow, get up,” the scholar said and held out his hand to Cornell. Remembering his guise, the “barbarian” stared up in mistrust. “Oh, don’t worry, I am no wizard. My name is Demercur Ylvain, beholden to the Lord of Knowledge Darawk. And my young friend poses no danger to you, either, believe me. Tell me, what is your name?”

“Nych,” Cornell growled, cautiously taking Ylvain’s hand. “Nych of the Ryelneyd tribe.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Nych. Ryelneyd, you said? Fascinating. Tell me, is Zechyll still chief?”

“What?” Cornell blinked, shook his head in surprise. *A priest of Darawk! The Divine Seeker of Knowledge... It’s a trap! He suspects...* Fortunately, though, this was a trap he knew how to avoid. “I beg your pardon, honored sage, but you must be mistaken. Zechyll is head of the Araysal, Vetora leads my people.”

Ylvain raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Then I ask for your forgiveness. My memory must be failing me."

Certainly, Cornell thought, and fish have taken to flying like birds.

The priest waved Barandas on, then he continued his walk towards Tangrain at the far end of the hall. As the wizard passed Cornell, he shot the friend a bewildered glance. Cornell shook his head slightly, imperceptible to any but the closest persons.

He did not realize that Sylasa had moved near him as well.

"Honored sage," Tangrain greeted Ylvain, leaning forward with a blankly polite expression on his face, "to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

The scholar chuckled. "Well do you know that it won't be a pleasure. My young friend here informs me that you have received a very special gift from your masters in Modayre."

"They are not my masters," Tangrain protested casually.

Ylvain shook his head. "Oh, Ceravin, mincing words won't get you anywhere with me. I thought you had learned that lesson by now, hard won though it would be for you. Now, as so many times before, I remind you that you have dedicated yourself to the worship of the great Darawk, wherefore it should be your sacred duty to hand over said gift to my order for proper study. Afterwards, the object shall be returned to you unharmed." The scholar's smirk never vanished, nor did his words sound enfolded with any holy duty – or any expectation of easy success. Cornell thought that these two must have been playing this game for quite a while.

Tangrain's reaction proved the assumption for he languidly shifted in his chair. "I have also promised my service to the lovely Alyssa. Would you, honored sage, also expect me to hand over each and every one of my servants to the priests and priestesses of the Goddess for, ahhh, inspection?"

Next to Cornell, Sylasa chuckled. So did some of the guards in the hall – and Barandas. Then again, the Cayaborean would expect nothing else from the wizard. His mind was happily at home in the gutter whenever he wasn't hunting money or powerful magical objects.

Which might explain his presence here, he realized and wondered what this "gift" was that Ylvain had mentioned. He wondered if it might be a dragon rod – and whether he might have a better chance to "acquire" it in Darawk's sacred academy.

"That," Ylvain shrugged, "is a matter you had better take up with the Goddess. My own association with Alyssa consists of no more than the occasional prayer for strength, whenever my wife demands I overcome my age." Again Sylasa chuckled, this time notably satisfied. The priest was fortunately far enough in front not to hear and so continued, "Ceravin, you still have not replied to my request. Will you grant me lease of that object?"

Tangrain raised his hands, and Cornell noted with interest the blueish color of his fingertips. A sign of elven descent? That could, possibly, explain how the merchant had managed to gather so many elves in his troop of bodyguards.

“Honored sage, I fear that you know the answer clearly. My station in life, rich though it must seem to you, is one that depends on my trade. What do you think, my fellow merchants would say if they learned that I just gave away one of the objects I put on sale? They would say, ‘Tangrain, he has become infirm in the mind. Let us no longer respect our agreements with him for he will not notice.’ Would you have me suffer because of your request?”

“Forgive me, Ceravin,” Ylvain answered after suppressing a noise that sounded suspiciously like laughter. “Never would I dream of imposing such trouble upon you. Yet this seems hardly the proper way to follow in your service to Darawk. The land of Modayre, though near in riding days, is more distant to us in the mind than the land of the furrag in the far south. To attain knowledge about Modayre and its magnificent trading goods is of supreme importance to the order of Darawk.”

Tangrain sunk back in his chair, shaking his head. “Let us cut this discussion short. Much as I enjoy it, there are matters pressing on my time. Perhaps we might be able to come to a... *symbolic* payment for the time of lease, provided that time does not interfere with any sale. Now,” he sat up straight again, rubbed his hands together, “which item were you referring to.”

“Come, Ceravin,” Ylvain chided him, “you know exactly what I am talking about. The silver gauntlet, five gemstones inset at the roots of the fingers. Surely –“

“How did you know about it?!”

Everything in the hall came to a sudden standstill as the voice of Tangrain roared out, bordering on the hysterical. Boragger instinctively swung his dragon rod about, aiming it at the scholar. Ylvain himself gave no sign of being disturbed. Quite different was Barandas’ reaction who seemed to shrink as he took a step back.

“Tell me, Ylvain!” Tangrain demanded and sprang from his chair. “Who told this boy about the gauntlet?! Or did he scry on my home? How did he breach the wards?”

The question should be, Who did he bribe? Cornell corrected and wished he held his sword instead of a quarterstaff.

Ylvain noted how Barandas had retreated and stepped in front of the wizard. “There is no need for this,” he said calmly. “The boy is in my employ and therefore had the resources of the academy at his disposal. Do not worry about any abusul. Rather tell me what price you demand.”

“A price?” Tangrain cried, his face red from anger. “After your magic wielder peered in... No, Ylvain, there’ll be no deal! The gauntlet is not for sale, and it’ll never be! Leave my hall, scholar, leave my home – and don’t you ever presume to invade it without invitation again! Am I understood?!”

“My, how quick you are to lose your manners. Very well, we shall leave.” Ylvain bowed graciously, then turned and headed out the hall, trailed by a disconcerted Barandas whose eyes kept shifting about for any possible attack.

“And you, barbarian,” Tangrain hollered moments later to Cornell, “get out of my sight as well! I shall pay no witless fool who cannot hold his fury!”

What?! Cornell's mind thundered. The merchant of all people had to accuse *him* of being ruled by anger? "Master Tangrain, I will –"

"Shut up, Nych, and get out!" Boragger shouted and raised his dragon rod to underline the words of his master.

Real fury burned in Cornell's eyes. He was so close to a dragon rod, and now he was sent away just because of – Barandas?! Yet there was no circumventing the convincing power of the weapon, so he nodded. Boragger nodded to one of the elves who held out Cornell's sword. The Cayaborean took it, raised his head high and walked out. No member of the Ryelneyd tribe would walk out meekly and humbled – and neither would Cornell have without his disguise.

On his way out he walked by Sylasa who watched him with quiet interest. No sweet smile was playing on her lips, but the sparkle in her eyes only served to strengthen her allure.

Maybe, he thought to himself, not all is lost yet. Proudly he smiled at her. "Remember the name of Nych of Ryelneyd, my lady. His might will bring greater fame than the trader Tangrain could hope for!"

She only raised an eyebrow, turned away and went over to the statue where she had stood before.

Apparently, his own powers of conviction were hardly a match for those of the dragon rod. Grim thoughts filled Cornell's head as he left the main hall and later the home of Ceravin Tangrain, the merchant of Modayrean goods.



Tangrain's home was in the wealthiest section of Chazevo – Sestercion -, close to the ocean but far away from the smelly harbor with its seedier inhabitants. No house was built less than twenty yards apart, each towering to a staggering three stories at least. The roads were wide avenues, paved with marble polished to perfection and blessed by priests so that horses or carts could not scratch the surface and blemish their appearance. Statues of former rulers of Chazevo dotted the sides of the road, some in front of shrines devoted to one of the many deities worshipped in the city. All the shrines were beautifully maintained, which was no wonder since gods were as much given to vanity as the people they had created in their image. A god well pleased with its worshippers was more likely to grant a prayer after all.

Yet Cornell had no eyes for that beauty as he stormed onto the avenue, his pack of belongings on his back. Fury and anger filled him. Two months of hard work ruined in less than an hour. Defeat at

Sylasa's hands would have set him back a little, but not much. It had been a set-up, of course, since few people could be as expert at quarterstaves as the woman warrior was. Boragger had wanted to put some humility into the cocky barbarian, establish his own superiority. Very well. Cornell could hardly fault him for that – he had put a great deal of work into that very appearance.

But now?!

Now he was right where he started. All right, so he now knew there was indeed at least one dragon rod in Tangrain's home. His superiors wanted one to be brought back to Cayaboré, to be studied so that hopefully they could reproduce the weapon and use it in the war against Ibrollene that everyone feared.

Yet what was he to do? Steal it?

"I'm not a thief," he grumbled.

"Then what are you, young man?"

Cornell looked up startled and found himself staring into the soft eyes of Demercur Ylvain. The scholar was standing behind him, his arms folded before his chest. Barandas was a step behind, spreading his arms wide, as if asking what he was supposed to do.

Ylvain continued, "Are you in trouble with the dragon riders?"

"I beg your pardon?" Cornell muttered.

"Well, seeing that your home is Cayaboré, I was wondering why you would need to take on the disguise of a man of the Ryelneyd," Ylvain explained easily. Behind him, Barandas eyes widened and he hastily shook his head. *I didn't tell him!* "The best I could think of was that you do not wish the dragon riders of your homeland to know where you are. They have eyes and ears in many nations, and they are well known to apprehend criminals even in the furthest recesses. 'There is no escape from a rider,' I believe their motto is. So, young man, is that the answer?"

"No!" Cornell spurted. "No rider is hunting me!" Which was quite true; after all, at home his own dragon rider uniform was waiting for him as well as his own dragon, Tempest. "And why do you claim that I am a Cayaborean? Do you think that I was in the wrong about great Vetora, leader of my people? That the Araysal Zechyll is chief?!"

A smile spread over Ylvain's face, growing into a laugh that made his beard quiver as if hornets buzzed in there. "Surely not, young man," he said when his laughter subsided. "You passed that test very well. Nonetheless your inflection and your tone are quite wrong, not to mention that the amulet you wear is an imitation."

Instinctively Cornell's eyes fell to the bronze amulet around his chest. A master smith serving the dragon rider corps had crafted it, working from exact descriptions a spy in the south had delivered.

The scholar laughed anew. "Oh, it is a masterful work indeed, boy. That is the point, though! None of the barbarian tribes possess the skills to work metal in this way. So, please do not insult me by pretending to be a Ryelneyd, I would much rather learn what your goals are. If you do not intend to

hide from the riders, then why the pretense, and why at Tangrain's home? That is, if you are not a thief?"

Cornell shrugged. "Begging your pardon, honored sage," he said in the polite tone of his homeland, "but this is nothing to concern you. Your sudden appearance has cost me much already, so I am not required to give up on this secret, am I?"

The eyes of Barandas had by now contracted to slits, his lips pressed close together. *You'll have to tell me*, his mien demanded clearly.

"Quite true, although I wonder why you reacted so ferociously to the appearance of young Barandas..." His voice trailed off and he glanced at the wizard. As Cornell had thought many times earlier, Barandas must have possessed the second sight for scant seconds before the scholar swiveled his head, the wizard's face changed to blank emptiness. "Well, there is no answer now. Yet, young man from Cayaboré, I am a scholar of Darawk and always in search for answers. If you are not willing to tell me right away, then perhaps I can uncover the secret over time.

"It appears," he said after a very brief pause, "that you have no shelter for the night. Unless you mean to leave Chazevo right away, I would gladly offer you a meal and a bed at the academy. The price would be that you allow me to speak with you and learn about your intentions from what you say – or do not say."

"That is a very gracious offer," Cornell nodded, noting Barandas' face lighting up. It was also sure to be better than one of the dingy inns in the harbor district Cornell would have had to choose otherwise, considering the paltry amount of coins in his possession. There was also no danger whatsoever to his person. An academy of Darawk's was warded by clerical blessings and magic that would inhibit any act of violence. Which also meant that it was the safest place for Ylvain to discuss with Cornell – should he prove to be a criminal despite his words. He smiled. "An offer that I will gladly accept, honored sage. Accepting your offer, I would be disrespectful if I did not reveal my true name. It is Cornell of Cayaboré."

"Well met then, Cornell of Cayaboré," Ylvain said and clasped the warrior's hand. "Let us be off then. The day is not yet that old, and much learning can still be done!"



"You have been hurt," Ylvain said as they entered the wide complex near the edge of Sestercion that housed Darawks's academy. Built of marble, it was an enthralling sight, white and airy like the

promise of knowledge that beckoned from within. A score of people clad in the tan vests of the scholars sat on the plaza in front, browsing through books or discussing various topics. The halls and corridors of the academy were empty for the moment, though. Voices issued from behind some of the doors they passed, sounding like lectures.

Cornell suddenly became aware that Ylvain was right. The blows Sylasa had struck had left their painful marks on him. Before, he had been too furious to notice, yet now he felt ache sting with every breath.

“This way,” Ylvain said and opened an oak door leading into a well furnished study, limned with shelves full of books and scrolls. Two windows were set on the opposite wall, allowing the afternoon sunlight to stream in and glisten on a number of metal idols placed on stands in the center of the room. “Sit down there,” the scholar continued, pointing to a leather chair with oak arms. Cornell obeyed. Ylvain went across to a closet while Barandas inobtrusively settled on another chair identical to Cornell’s.

After a few moments the scholar returned with a flask in his hand. “Pull up your shirt, young man,” he said as he pulled the stopper from the flask. “I am sure you would prefer the ministrations of a priestess of Alyssa, yet I assure you that an old scholar-priest can work the same magic –“ he grinned, “- at least as far as your wounds are concerned.”

Cornell did as he was asked. His chest was covered with spots already turning blue. Added to that were a goodly number of scars he had contracted in the past, painting a pattern like tattoos over his welltoned muscles. “Quite a pummeling you have taken,” Ylvain muttered and sprinkled some of the liquid in the flask over the warrior’s body. It stung wherever it hit, without a sensation of wetness. The cleric waved his right hand slowly over the chest, mumbling arcane words, calling down the blessing of his god.

The aches subsided quickly. After a few more passes of the hand, the spots began to fade. Five minutes later, not a trace remained, and Ylvain replaced the stopper in the flask. Sweat had gathered on his forehead. “You may cover yourself again,” he said huskily before he turned for a jar of water on his desk.

“Thank you, honored sage,” Cornell said.

“Don’t mention it,” the scholar answered, his voice returned to freshness as he put down the jar. “After all, you have just paid some part of your dues. Barandas, please leave us.”

Surprise and worry plastered across Cornell’s face, as the wizard’s head jerked up. “Honored –“, he began to protest only to be cut short by Ylvain. “This is none of your concern, my boy. This man wishes to keep a secret, so it should not be for a stranger to learn.”

“A –“

Barandas checked himself abruptly, nodded reverently to the sage and left, not without casting a vicious glance in Cornell’s direction.

The warrior sat upright. He worked hard to conceal his anxiety. “What payment are you talking about?” he asked cautiously.

In response the scholar flashed him a cheery smile. “What is the name of your dragon at home? I suppose you’ve kept the same beast that bit your arm when you were younger.” He took a pause to enjoy Cornell’s consternation then continued, “The marks are still visible. And quite typical of a horsedragon’s jaws. A young one, playfully biting, to be sure, else you would no longer have an arm.”

“True,” Cornell admitted through gnashed teeth.

“You should not worry overly much, young friend. Few people have studied dragons enough to recognize the scars for what they are. I had the aid of a treatise written by a splendid researcher over a century ago. Albaroy of Corvales’ texts are, to your fortune, not widely distributed. Now,” he sat down in the chair Barandas had vacated, “I draw the conclusion that you are, in fact, one of the famed dragon riders of Cayaboré. I know of no other land where horsedragons are bred; only the Cayaboreans associate hatchling dragons with their future riders. So, you still haven’t answered my question about that name.”

Cornell smiled resignedly. “Tempest. A female, pretty much the fiercest I’ve ever met. Honored sage, I have to thank you again for not revealing this to my... the wizard.”

“Don’t mention it.” He clasped his hands together. “Now what would a dragon rider be wanting from dear Ceravin Tangrain? Especially disguised as the barbarian Nych... No, don’t bother to tell me. It is so much more entertaining to discover the truth myself!”

Resignation flared through Cornell as the eyes of the scholar rested inquisitively on him. They seemed to bore through his skull, starting to flip through the pages of his mind like one of the many books he kept in his study. Knowing that mindreading was not a gift any of Darawk’s scholars possessed served little to put Cornell at ease as he settled down to watch his secrets being torn from him one by one.



“The wizard Barandas? Have you seen him?” Cornell asked the pert female scholar sitting on the stairs to the plaza.

She looked up from the scroll she had been deciphering, and her deep blue eyes showered him with reproach. “Young man, has your mother not taught you any manners?”

Young man?! Cornell thought, still furious after the conversation with Ylvain. This priestess had just had her twentieth birthday, from the looks of her! *Calm down, will you? She is a scholar, and this is her academy. Not to mention that Mother would have your hide for this kind of behavior towards a woman.* “Forgive me, honored sage. My temper has taken too much of a leave, indeed. If it is within your knowledge, would you please indicate where the wizard Barandas is?”

She cocked her head, clearly weighing whether his contrition was acceptable. After a moment she nodded, satisfied. “He has gone to the shrine of Ke’hatch, over there. And, young man,” she stopped him as he had already turned in the direction she had pointed out, “you should take better care of your words. Tempers of such fury have ruined many a good opportunity.”

“I am grateful for your advice,” Cornell said, as politely as he could, “and beg your leave.”

The scholar smiled, showing a perfect set of teeth as she graciously waved him away and concentrated once more on the scroll.

A curse on his lips, Cornell went on. The shrine she had mentioned opened directly onto the plaza, a white, one-story building fronted by pillars. Bas-reliefs were chiseled into the stone over the door, depicting some religious scenes that the Cayaborean couldn’t care less about at the moment. All he cared about right now was finding Barandas. And wringing his scrawny neck like a chicken. “All your fault, old friend,” he muttered when he pushed open the right valve of the door.

Inside there was a hall with benches for prayer, arranged in a circle around the star-shaped altar at the center. Scented candles burned on the altar, below a golden globe that rested on a slim stand. The local godling Ke’hatch was, after all, associated with the sun, the primary source of light. Two worshippers chanted in low voices, but no sign of Barandas.

Marvelous. Cornell shook his head, about to walk right back when he noticed the doors leading out the other side. *Well, I don’t have much else to go on,* he reasoned. If Barandas had indeed come to the shrine, then it was doubtful that he would have wanted to worship. Not that he disrespected the gods – he preferred paying his tributes to such as Alyssa rather than Chazevo’s dour God of Light.

He walked along the circumference until he reached the first door. There was no sign to indicate what was beyond, and frankly Cornell was unfamiliar with the layout of Ke’hatch’s shrines. This could easily lead to the private quarters of a priest. *Oh, I’m a barbarian anyway, am I not?* The Cayaborean grinned, opened the door and slipped through into the halflit room beyond.

The grin evaporated when he saw a crossbow whirl around and a quarrel spring towards him.



Instinct took over and slammed Cornell to the ground at the first sign of the crossbow's motion. The quarrel he saw rushing well over his head, then he pushed himself up and forward, to tackle the legs of his foe. His shoulders connected squarely, his foe toppled forward. Cornell skipped sideways, rammed his knee up to receive the falling body – and groaned as the knee hit a thick unresistant material.

He had no time to wonder about what that material was for his opponent had scrambled to his knees, a shortsword blinking as he unsheathed it.

Cornell jumped up, launched his boot at the unprotected head. The man avoided the kick, too surprised to cut at the leg. Just what Cornell had hoped, now having enough time to draw his bastard sword. He became aware of a commotion a few feet further into the room, two more men fighting. None of them was moving in his direction so he looked back to his immediate problem.

His opponent brought his shortsword forward in a stab. Cornell slashed it aside, following his boot through in another kick. This one hit the thick vest on his foe's chest squarely, propelled him back. Cornell stepped forward, slashed at the hand holding the shortsword. A nick drew blood, then the blade jabbed his own aside and the man launched his own head at Cornell's midsection.

The blow was too fast for him to avoid. Air exploded from his lungs, yet he was not too stunned to forget his opponent's blade. His left fist hammered into the man's neck while his right hand brought another slash down onto the shortsword. The slash connected, and the blade dropped.

"I've got the crossbow aimed at him, Cornell," Barandas' calm voice sounded at that moment.

Both the opponent and Cornell looked over to see the wizard indeed holding the crossbow trained on the attacker. Behind him, a crumpled body lay on the ground, a dagger hilt protruding from his neck. Fear washed over the face of Cornell's foe, and before either the Cayaborean or the wizard could react, he grasped Cornell's blade – and rammed it into his own throat.

Gurgling noises foaming from his mouth, a triumphant gaze in his eyes, the man keeled over, blood spewing forth from his wound.

"What the...?" Cornell muttered.

Barandas lowered the crossbow with a disgusted face. "Holy Tide, what a mess!"

"Is that all you have to say?!" The Cayaborean kneeled and took a closer look at the man who had impaled himself on his sword. The vest had struck him as familiar before, now he knew that he had seen the sort before. At Tangrain's place. The armor vests that the accepted guards wore, like Boragger. Nobody else used it, since it was probably one of those Modayrean goods that Tangrain never sold, just like the dragon rods.

"No," Barandas answered as he bent down to look through the pockets of the man he had downed, also retrieving his dagger. "Thank you, Cornell. The two of them would have killed me if you hadn't come in. Ahhh!" He fished a pouch of coins from under the man's vest – identical to the one his colleague wore – and opened it with a delighted sigh. "Good solid gold, hah! What's yours got?"

The Cayaborean suppressed the acerbic comment on his tongue. Instead he got up and said drily, "Look for yourself. You are *so* much better at this. And while you're at it, please tell me what you were doing here. You shouldn't have left the academy, I'd say."

"Probably," Barandas agreed while methodically continuing his search and clucking in satisfaction every now and then as an item wandered from the corpse into one of the wizard's pouches. "The mousy one over there told me he had information on the gauntlet, but he couldn't tell me in the academy. Said the wards there spied on everyone so that no knowledge of any kind would be wasted. That makes sense, I thought. So I went over here, his friend pulled the crossbow on me, and started to ask me how I knew of the gauntlet. That's when you came in. Satisfied?"

"Not by a long shot," Cornell muttered, thinking once more about how he could yet acquire the dragon rod. "But this isn't the right place to talk about it. Are you finished?"

The wizard quickly patted the body again, then he nodded and nonchalantly handed a pouch to Cornell. The warrior sighed as he pocketed his share. Both checked each other for tell-tale blood stains, then they went back to the worship room of the shrine, unnoticed by anyone.



"You owe me," Cornell said when they had returned to the small room Barandas had been given in the academy, "twice over." On the way back, they had passed the female cleric still studying her scroll. She had looked at them with interest, but as she noticed Barandas returning the gaze with an all too obvious leer, her gaze had turned cold and spun down to the scroll.

Now the wizard dropped into a wicker chair near the barred window, stretching out his legs comfortably. "Once, sure, but twice? Come on, Cornell, counting that far isn't that hard."

"Twice," the Cayaborean insisted and stood before the wizard threateningly. "The shrine, and before you caused me to be thrown out of Tangrain's. And now you are going to tell me what you are doing here. You are going to tell me *exactly* why you are after that gauntlet, and what it is."

Barandas shrugged. "It's magical, isn't that enough? The Modayreans manufacture great stuff. That's why you were there, right? Looking for a new magical sword? One that isn't inhabited by a trapped soul this time?"

"Don't try to distract me." The reminder of that particular incident was all too unpleasant; running around and fighting with a blade that he knew held the soul of a previous owner, a miserable elf mercenary who was all too bloodthirsty for Cornell's taste. "The gauntlet."

“All right, all right,” the wizard shrugged again. “It’s a resurrector. Someone who’s just died within the past two or three hours, the gauntlet can capture the soul and put it back into the body. Heals the most serious wounds, too.” His eyes had grown animated, belying the easy rest of his body. “Do you have any idea what people would pay for that service?”

“Ah,” Cornell commented and dropped onto the small cot behind him. A resurrector. Incredibly powerful magic. Though rumors abounded about artefacts like that hidden somewhere on Gushémal, only Modayre could be skilled enough to create a new object with that power. The value... beyond measure, not just financially but also in terms of knowledge. An unbidden vision appeared in front of his mind’s eye – his return to Cayaboré not bearing a dragon rod but rather the gauntlet. (Or both, perhaps?) Great Haguén, that would be a glorious homecoming! His father would keel over full of pride, and his superiors... would likely send him out again as quickly as possible, not even allowing him the time for a single ride on Tempest. Which was probable anyway, considering the state of affairs back home.

He sighed. “Barandas, whatever made you think that Tangrain would part with this gauntlet under *any* circumstances? Particularly without money! You can bet your greedy head that he knows the gauntlet’s value as well as you.”

“Who,” Barandas grinned, “said anything about my expecting this ploy to succeed?”

Cornell was taken aback, took a closer look at his friend’s face and found that the weaselly features had become more obvious. Understanding dawned all too clearly. “You just wanted to take a look around the place and see where the gauntlet is. Check the security measures.”

The wizard’s grin turned shamelessly open, his eyes strangely innocent. “Why, Cornell, you may not call yourself a thief, but appellations never stopped *me*, now did they?”

“I’m assuming Ylvain has no idea that you’re using him.”

Sour lines drew across Barandas’ face. “You’ve spoken to him. Do you think there’s *anything* this man does not know? I guess he wants to use *me* to get the gauntlet, to hand it over to him for *study*. Whether I’d get it back, now there’s one thing I would not guess at. The academy has a splendid museum of magical artefacts. Very well guarded.”

Cornell nodded. So far Barandas’ words made sense. And indicated what had drawn the wizard to the academy in the first place. He probably had been planning to steal something from that museum – or acquiring it in a trade of some sort. “You’re still planning to steal the gauntlet. After the encounter with Tangrain’s men.”

“Especially after that encounter!” Barandas leaped out of his seat. “Trying to kill me? By the tides of magic, I *will* get that gauntlet. Are you in?”

“What? Why should I help you?”

“Because you know the place better than I do! And you’ll get your fair share – you know I never fleece my friends. Aside from that, we could take a look at whatever you want there.”

Cornell squinted. “You have no idea what I’m after. And I don’t owe you anything.”

“Really?” Barandas grinned. “Remember the incident with the burrower dragonfly? If it hadn’t been for me, you’d be maggot fodder.”

“And if it hadn’t been for me, you’d have a crossbow quarrel in your throat right now!” Cornell countered.

“Well, all right, then don’t come with me.” The wizard shrugged. “It’ll be more difficult, but that’s what I’d been planning for anyway.” Calmly he went over to an ash chest in the corner of the room, opened it and withdrew a sleek, black tunic, followed by a number of items carefully wrapped in cloth. He closed the chest and set all on top of it.

Cornell stared. “Are you going to try the break-in now?! It’s bright day.”

Barandas scowled. “So you do think I have less brains than a donkey. Of course I’m waiting until tonight. I’ll have to craft some magic, though, and that’s going to take some time. Care to watch?” He grinned viciously, knowing fully well how little Cornell liked magic. Use it if it was available, yes, but *like* it? Absolutely not. So the wizard waited gleefully until his friend has risen from the chair and turned towards the door before he added, “Well, I wouldn’t wish to keep you from running into Ylvain again. Enjoy!”

Cornell stopped dead in his tracks, cast a fierce look at his friend and dropped into the wicker chair.



The first two items Barandas unwrapped were quite unremarkable: a pair of leather boots and some cottonballs. He murmured an incantation, pulled his dagger and softly pricked his forefinger. The drops of blood he let fall onto the cotton, holding each of the balls close to the wound for a few moments until the nick had closed. What Cornell found curious was that the cotton became moist yet it didn’t change its color to the red of blood.

Barandas whistled off-key when he took the balls and rubbed them generously over the boots. “In case you’re wondering, I am creating a magical layer around the boots that works like the cotton and will muffle any sounds. It is the blood that holds the layer and the qualities of the cotton so I’d better get it spread evenly over the soles.”

He dropped the boots to the ground carelessly. With care, though, he put the cottonballs aside before he started unwrapping the next items: a pair of gloves, garlic, and a tiny metal idol that looked like an alreu with unusually large hands. “I love this,” Barandas said with a wide smile. “Found it in

one of the libraries here at the academy. Imagine, they have an entire library for the study of alreus. Dreadful thought, isn't it? The thieving manlings getting this much attention..."

Cornell stayed quiet. He had his own misgivings about the manlings, three feet tall humanoids, known as they were for their endless curiosity and proficiency at acquiring the objects of their curiosity. Yet the wizard's smile told that he would get a spectacular effect from this.

So it proved when Barandas used the idol to crush the garlic. He muttered a few words in a harsh foreign language that Cornell assumed was the alreu tongue, then a glow suffused the idol wherever it had touched the garlic. The wizard smeared the remainder of the garlic over the idol, forming an even spread. He put on the gloves and rolled the idol in his hands about.

"Don't tell me," Cornell muttered. "Your gloves have now the power to repel anyone nearby."

The wizard shook his head. "Nice idea, but I don't think I have the strength for a spell like that. The garlic is just a medium; I haven't the slightest idea why it has to be garlic. I tried it with onions – even with blood – but there's no effect at all. Except for the smell. Which is missing here, by the way." He held up his gloved hands, yet Cornell had no interest in finding out the truth of the statement.

"Let me show you what the gloves can do now," Barandas continued and put one hand high against the wall. Then he – pulled himself up by that hand! The glove stuck firmly on the wall, and so did the other one when Barandas placed it half a foot above the first. He had no problem removing the first hand and pulled himself yet higher, until he hung right below the ceiling and cast a triumphant gaze towards Cornell. "This is fun, friend! Scaling walls, the easy way!" He let go of the wall, landing easily on his feet and then glanced at the gloves with protective pride before he laid them next to the boots. "The best part is, both of these things will get even stronger by the night. The liquids have to seep into the cloth, you know. And now for the final touch..."

The last item that remained wrapped soon proved to be a simple yellow cord. Just a piece of string. Yet Barandas handled it carefully as he lifted it and wound it around his wrist. "Don't be fooled," he cautioned, not even bothering to check on the raised eyebrow of his friend, "this is actually an antique artefact. It used to be held in an impressive glass contraption that its – ah – previous owners believed were the real artefact. My humble discovery was that the string is the older part, by more than a thousand years. Now why, I thought, would anyone preserve a piece of string if it isn't that simple cord which holds the true magic." He gave a careful tug on the string, nodded in satisfaction. "I gave the owners fifty gold pieces, and they thought I was a retard. Well," Barandas moved his wrist over the treated boots and gloves. A soft purple glow emanated from the string, growing stronger the closer it came to the magical objects. "I don't believe I am retarded in any way."

"Only morals."

The wizard cocked his head, smiled and nodded. "You do have a point there," he conceded. "So, you have seen my preparations. What do you say, Cornell, don't you want to join me after all? Or maybe you could tell me what you seek, and I'll get it for you."

It was Cornell's turn to look sourly. Barandas' preparations actually did look sound. He might not be a powerful wizard, but a careful one he had always been. Perhaps, he wondered, this was actually a good opportunity to retrieve a dragon rod... perhaps better than his original plan to pose as a barbarian.

"You win, friend."

"Hand me your boots," Barandas smirked, "I kept the cotton wet for them."



The house of Ceravin Tangrain was well guarded. And no less well placed were the magical wards that detected motion. Evenly set along the outer wall, invisible to the eye, they left few spots outside their range. With the aid of the string, though, it did not take Barandas long to find one of these spots where the string no longer glowed.

Cornell kept a lookout for any guard while the wizard quickly scaled the wall with the aid of his magical gloves, unlocked a window in the third floor with a very ordinary picklock and slipped inside. Moments later he dropped a rope, held tight while Cornell scrambled up.

"Where are we?" Barandas whispered after his friend had come inside.

They were in a small room that held an elegant couch, a low table and a painting on the wall that neither could recognize in the dim light. "It's called a reading room," Cornell explained after a moment's thought. "In the times of Tangrain's father, there were many visitors, for all I have heard. The third floor used to be the guest quarters, along with rooms like this for their entertainment. You probably could see all the way to the ocean back then, before the other buildings were raised."

"Good. So where do we go from here? I don't think Tangrain would keep the gauntlet down in his hall with the merchandise."

Cornell agreed. Neither would the dragon rod be there. Unless there was more than just the one Boragger had used, the weapon was most likely in his room. Which was also on the second floor, along with Tangrain's private quarters. The other guards had their rooms up here, yet Tangrain wanted his chief bodyguard always nearby. Not a bad notion. But on the second floor a goodly number of guards were on the prowl at night, occasionally checked by Boragger. Here there would be only two or three, at best, not counting the ones who might unexpectedly leave their chambers.

"One level down. Tangrain lives there."

A nod from the wizard, then they slowly moved out of the room. Cornell marveled at the way magic snuffed out any sound from his boots, no matter that the soles should have sounded loudly on the wood floor of the corridor they cautiously walked along. There was no sign of guards about. Now and then Barandas glanced at his string to check whether any magic was around; probably wards. The string remained dark.

Cornell couldn't help but smile when they walked past the door behind which his room had been until that very morning. He had only been allowed to move in three weeks before, after laboriously introducing himself and his fighting abilities to Tangrain's guards. Such a lot of work, and if today's attempt succeeded, he might as well not have bothered.

As they neared the staircase, the string started to glow. "Damn," Barandas muttered.

"It can't be a motion detector," Cornell reasoned. "Otherwise it would go off anytime a guard walked past. Maybe it is one of the wards that prevent scrying."

The wizard shrugged helplessly. "Could be, but I have no way of knowing. Any kind of magic activates the glow if it's strong enough." Unsaid went the fact that the magic in Barandas' own gloves was too weak to be noted by the string. "We'll just have to try it."

More carefully than before Cornell started the way down. No cries of alarm sounded, nor did any magical noise erupt around them. Followed by the wizard, Cornell soon reached the second floor, and stopped.

This floor was relatively well lit by the magical lampsticks from Modayre – and a few yards down the corridor a guard stood. A guard who looked his way.

"Nych?" the man exclaimed in astonishment. "Didn't the old vulture set you on the road?"

Cornell forced himself to breathe easily, while he sent a silent prayer to the gods that he still wore his outfit as a barbarian. No less grateful was he for the fact that Barandas froze on the steps as soon as he heard the guard's voice.

"Yes, he did," Cornell said and confidently walked towards the guard. "I had forgotten some of my belongings. Do you wish to make a problem of this?"

The guard shook his head, smiling at the belligerence of the supposed barbarian. "Don't worry, Nych. As long as the vulture or Boragger don't see you, that'll be fine."

"What was that?!" Cornell suddenly growled, his gaze swiveling with concern back towards the staircase. So did the guard's – and missed seeing Cornell's arm race up, slinging around his neck and pressing hard. Not a sound escaped the guard's mouth, the Cayaborean's arm cutting off his air supply. Moments passed, then the guard's body went limp. Cornell held him tight a little longer, to make sure the man wasn't faking, then he gently lowered the body to the ground. "Barandas," he whispered.

The wizard soon joined him, saw what had happened and immediately drew some cord and a rag from a flat rucksack. With that he bound and gagged the guard, then both shoved him into a dark corner. "A pity there are no closets," Barandas nagged. "He'll be found pretty fast this way, I'd say."

“Let’s hope not,” Cornell shot back. “You don’t have any magic to mask him, do you?”

Barandas rolled his eyes angrily “If I did, I would have used it to mask *me* first,” he grumbled.

“That,” a new voice said calmly, “would not have helped, wizard. Don’t move.”

The two men whirled about instinctively – and froze when a lightning bolt flashed between them.

Down the corridor, right where the guard had been, Boragger stood, dragon rod leveled at them, a menacing frown on his face. Not to mention a glad sparkle in his eyes at seeing the supposed barbarian again, in these circumstances. “Didn’t the lady’s lesson help, Nych?” he taunted. “Drop your weapons. Careful, wizard, I’ve got my eyes on you.”

Cornell felt a terrible laugh choke in his throat. As if Barandas could have let go a fireball! The darkness of the dragon rod’s barrel seemed to bore into his head, the very object that had brought him to Chazevo, and now it might as well be the object of his destruction.

They were caught, and escape was not an option.

Not yet.

TO BE CONTINUED
