



Call of the Dragon, Part II

by Marc H. Wyman & Chris Bagues

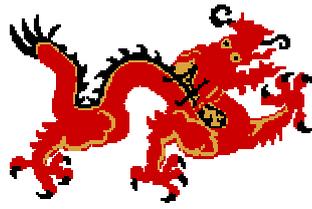
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“Of all the dungeons in this town,” the wizard Barandas muttered, “we had to walk into this one.”

Opposite him, Cornell of Cayaboré sat, staring wistfully at the tiny slit of a window high above their heads. Little in the way of air passed through, certainly not enough to take away the smell of refuse and sweat. Too much of said sweat issued from his clothes made of leather cured from a thymbair, the proper clothes of a southern barbarian from Robhovard. Itchy they were, and Cornell wished he had never chosen that particular disguise when he presented himself to Ceravin Tangrain, the wealthy merchant of Chazevo. Tangrain was one of the few dealers in merchandise from the mysterious land of Modayre whose inhabitants excelled at creating magical items. Simple items such as firelighters or lampsticks, but also a ferocious weapon such as the dragon rod.

His superiors in the dragon rider corps of Cayaboré had sent the young man to Chazevo to acquire one of the rods. His disguise as Nych from the tribe of Ryelneyd had been excellent, he had made it so far as to be almost accepted as one of Tangrain’s bodyguards.

When suddenly the doors had burst open and his old friend Barandas had appeared, in the tow of Demercur Ylvain, a Darawk scholar. Appropriate to his disguise, Cornell had tried to attack the wizard – not least to keep him from blurting out the Cayaborean’s real name. The fact that it had been the proper response to seeing a wizard still gnawed at him. It had been the right thing to do – but Tangrain hadn’t seen it that way and thrown Cornell out of his house.

“All because of your gauntlet,” he muttered.

Barandas sighed. “Are we going through that again? Look, if it *was* my gauntlet, I wouldn’t have had to go in here and steal it!”

The wizard was right, but Cornell wasn’t about to grant him that point. Another powerful Modayrean item, a gauntlet of resurrection was the reason that Barandas had come to Chazevo. Ever greedy for magic, money or women – ordered by whichever was more available at the time -, Barandas had been planning to rob it. Like the dragon rods, it wasn’t for sale – whether because Modayre forbade it or Tangrain wanted it for himself, it didn’t matter.

Cornell’s fault was to join his friend on that robbery. He wasn’t a professional thief, and Barandas could at best be described as a competent layman. Still he had gathered some interesting magical tools. They might have tipped the scales in their favor.

Might have, he reminded himself. They had only been in the mansion for half an hour when they were captured by Tangrain’s chief bodyguard, Boragger. The burly guard had aimed a dragon rod at them, and there was no arguing with a weapon that fired bolts of lightning.

And now they were trapped in the dungeon of Tangrain's house – or fortress as might be the more proper description. At first Cornell had wondered why they were still alive. Barandas, of course, never had bothered with that kind of morose thinking. "We got out of worse scraps," he'd said confidently before checking the cell for any kind of edibles that could be found, while Cornell had tested the door's lock as well as any metal bar and stone in the wall. Both searches had proved to be in vain, after which both had settled down to wait for what would happen.

Something happened rather quickly.

"Looks like your quest for fame ran dry fast, pretty boy," a female voice said, in an alluring timbre that set both men's hearts pounding instantly. Barandas' head flew around to the bars, his eyes widening when he took in the magnificent figure visible through the bars of the cell door. Barely five and a half feet tall, luscious hazelnut hair framing a face that needed no makeup for enhancement. The woman's curves were barely hidden by the silvery chain armor so intricately forged that the chains seemed to flow into one another and move as easily as silk with every motion.

While the wizard's eyes did their best to leave his skull and explore every inch of the woman, Cornell's lips went taut and he kept staring at the tiny slit of a window. "Sylasa," he muttered, recognizing the voice of the Ibrollenian warrior woman who had bested him in quarterstaff combat just the day before. (Or rather, pulverized his defense, but the Cayaborean rarely dwelled on such details.) And he also remembered his unfortunate comment that his fame one day would outshine Tangrain's, right before he'd left the mansion.

"Your barbarian mind is intriguingly fast," Sylasa said flatly. "Well, Nych, how do you expect to escape this trap?"

Finally Cornell swiveled his head around and found that he was caught once more by the beauty of the Ibrollenian. Urges raced through his body, brutally fought down by his mind. "I expect nothing," he said in his barbarian imitation. "The future will bring what it will, and I will use it. Is that what you wished to know, woman?"

A fast smile whisked over her lips, very much like the smile of a mother at a child convinced his lies won't go unchallenged. "Oh, very much so." Their eyes locked, both sets unrevealing and still as ice, yet somehow ferocious at the same time.

Barandas frowned, looked from one to the other, then quickly said, "Well, how can we be of assistance, Miss... Sylasa?"

A moment passed before Sylasa said – never taking her eyes off Cornell –, "Not at all, wizard. Nych, Tangrain's men will be coming for you shortly. That will not be pleasant. Be strong, pretty boy."

"I will."

"Good," she nodded, turned around and stepped out of sight without saying another word.

Cornell folded his legs over each other, composed his face and went back to staring at the window. The frown on the wizard's face deepened as he scowled, "What by the tides of magic is going on here, friend? Did I miss something?"

"Yes, you did," the Cayaborean answered.

"Go jump into a grasstrap! Stop this barbarian routine, and answer me, you bloody –" Barandas interrupted himself, stared exasperatedly at his friend for a while before he sighed and leaned back against the wall. "Least they could do was feed us, I say," he muttered to nobody in particular.



"We have not yet been introduced, I fear," the tall elf said when Cornell was strapped down to a granite table in a small chamber that smelled worse than the dungeon had. Three burly henchmen of Tangrain's made sure that the Cayaborean could not hope to escape; and every one of them, Cornell noted absent-mindedly, had visible traces of elven blood.

"My name is Leur C'traeh," the full-blooded elf continued, the tips of his pointy ears quivering slightly in anticipation. The tone of his skin was a rich blue, counterpointed by the cyan hair and the magenta-colored, almond eyes. Mirrored tattoos were on his cheeks, dark lines of no meaning to Cornell. "I will be your host for the next few hours, my dear savage friend," C'traeh continued while he waved the bodyguards out of the room and sat down next to the table. "We will have a nice conversation, about the most varied of topics. But tell me first, are you of elven descent?" He pulled objects from a drawer beneath the table, began arraying it on a tray inset into the granite – and then stopped. "Oh, my, forgive me." He smiled, then removed the gag from Cornell's mouth. "Is that better?"

Cornell stared at him. There was little doubt in his mind as to what the elf had in mind. As a matter of fact, few elves hid their delight in inflicting pain on others. Not to mention Sylasa's warning.

"Dear me," C'traeh shook his head, "rather unresponsive, aren't we, my friend? Well, let's just see..." He took up one of the objects from his tray – a wickedly curved stiletto knife with which he quickly and expertly tore up Cornell's clothes, miraculously missing his skin. Chilly air breathed over his exposed body, seemingly impossible in a hot place like Chazevo.

The elf inspected the Cayaborean's body methodically, spreading his fingers and toes, then pulled back his eyelids to peer deep into Cornell's pupils. "Ah, splendid," he finally nodded. "You are human indeed, my friend. That means I may dispense with any of the special methods reserved for my own

kin. Rather annoying that, if you know what I mean. After all, my people are somewhat less receptive to pain than your kind is. Well,” he sighed, “we’d better get started, hadn’t we?”

The quivering of the elf’s ears got stronger. He put down the stiletto and replaced it with a set of needles whose tips glistened dark and moist. “Now, good Nych,” C’traeh said, waving the needles about lightly, while Cornell’s muscles stiffened, “the problem is that Master Tangrain is upset that one of his own bodyguards – though not sworn to him yet – would betray him. The circumstances are rather uncomfortable for you. So, tell me, why did you come here with the wizard? Were you sent for some of the baubles here?”

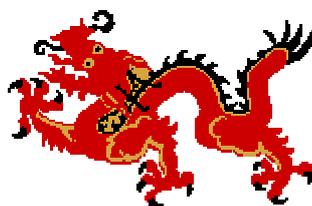
The needles hovered over Cornell’s eyes. The Cayaborean tensed, stared straight ahead without focusing on the dark tips.

“Goodness gracious, you truly are stubborn. Well, it can’t be helped, I suppose.”

A single needle stabbed down into the skin next to Cornell’s right eye, scraped over the bone – and fiery pain rushed across his face, engulfing his head in a corona of flame.

“Well?” the elf’s patient voice drove through the pain, resigned to wait a long time before receiving his answers.

To Cornell, the time would be far, far longer.



Cornell floated in darkness. Splotches of red appeared and disappeared at random, dancing about for a moment before winking out again. Slowly consciousness began seeping back into him, and with awareness came pain. Dull pain at first, slowly growing and expanding, just like the splotches of red that became ever more prominent.

Tempest... Gotta teach that dragon a bit more discipline. One day her playing around is gonna kill me...

Red flowed over him, bringing an aching feeling of his body. His thoughts were still disjointed, looking forward to the moment when the healer would wake him up. The commander of his dragon rider squad, Hydrochyll, would be called in to chew him out, followed quickly by Cornell’s father. Father would calm Hydrochyll down, force him out of the room – only to scold his son worse than the commander could have dreamed of doing.

Cornell was actually looking forward to his father’s tirades. Father knew Tempest all too well, the horse dragon’s sire had been Father’s own steed for ten years. Oh, yes, that would –

“Still alive, pretty boy?”

Now that wasn't Father's voice, he was quite sure – and suddenly Cornell was catapulted into reality. Along with pain that was throbbing all through his body, worse than anything Tempest had ever cooked up. His memory of the “conversation” with C'traeh was fuzzy, questions intermingling with the sensation of poisoned needles pressing into his flesh intermingling with his own screams. Had he spoken? Had he been able to articulate a single word?

“In case you are still alive, C'traeh is angry. Very angry. That should be a reason for you to feel proud. Provided you can feel anything aside from the pain.”

“Sylasa.”

The name came out accompanied by a cough, moisture on his lips. Blood? There was barely time for him to think about it when something wet and cool touched his lips and swiped the blood off.

“Why... are you... here?”

“Good question,” Sylasa's voice came from far away. “Boragger's men will be here shortly to bring you back to your cell. I suppose that it will be the wizard's turn then. Worse luck. C'traeh will vent his anger at him. The wizard probably won't last more than half an hour.”

Fresh pain surged through Cornell's spine, as if rekindled by the memory. Slowly, he opened his eyes. The same rough ceiling was above him, and leaning over him the Ibrollenian woman. “Mustn't... let that happen,” Cornell breathed. “You've got to... help... me.”

“Do I?” Her eyes were cold, her beautiful features as immobile as a granite statue's. “Why should I care about the wizard? Or you, for that matter, savage barbarian that you are.”

Cornell flexed his hands. Liquid fire ran through his arms in response, and a moan of pain was muffled by another cough. More cautiously he tried again. It still hurt, but it was bearable. More or less. *Now for the rest of the body*, he told himself. *First the legs. Then the shoulders. Push yourself off the table. Come on! Do it, Cornell of Cayaboré!*

Sylasa's hands suddenly rested on his chest. “Don't,” she said. “You won't be able to stand for another hour at least. And there are several guards in the corridor who would love to cut you down. You do not stand a chance.”

“I've... heard that before,” he muttered and shoved his legs sideways, gritting his teeth at the new pain. His legs felt oddly cold and distant, like an unattached part of his body. Bloodflow must have been impeded at some point. *Move!* he ordered himself, not able to feel exactly whether his legs obeyed.

The Ibrollenian woman's hands disappeared from his chest. “Nych, stop it. You won't help the wizard by getting yourself killed.”

Just a little bit further, and his right leg should be over the edge. Just a little bit... There! It had dropped over, dangling lightly. *Now for the chest!* he thought triumphantly and tensed his muscles to...

... feel convulsions rack his body, wave after wave of hurt that hammered the breath out of his lungs. Greedily, painfully, he snapped for fresh air, gulping it quickly. His heartbeat raced, his eyes misty as he looked at Sylasa. "Help me, Sylasa," he groaned. "Please. You can't let this... happen."

The woman returned his gaze calmly. A sparkle twinkled in her brown eyes – or was that just Cornell's empty hope? "Please," he repeated, putting all his emotion into the word.

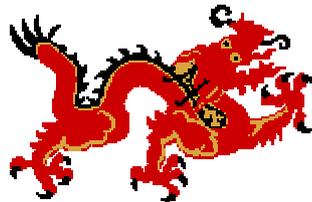
"You're right, I cannot allow this," Sylasa answered after a moment, then she reached down and pulled Cornell's legs back onto the table. "Stay," her voice sounded coldly, as she placed her hands back on his chest, this time with force.

The feeling of betrayal flooded through Cornell's mind as his head dropped back and he stared helplessly at the rough ceiling again.

A minute or so later, the door opened and Boragger entered with the part-elves who had taken Cornell to the chamber hours earlier. The chief bodyguard acknowledged Sylasa with a grunt, then took a close look at the Cayaborean on the table. A smile dug itself into his harsh face. "How nice," Boragger said. "C'traeh left something for us."

With that he grabbed Cornell's shoulders, pushed him up and shoved him into the waiting arms of the part-elves. "Bring him back to the cell. Sylasa, you'll be coming with me."

The guards dragged Cornell out of the room, his legs sliding over the ground, his head lolling about. He couldn't see clearly, too much movement, too much confusion. Only once did his eyes focus – on the sight of Sylasa, watching him closely.



"I am deeply sorry, honored sage," Tangrain said, leaning back comfortably in his chair on the pedestal at the far end of the Great Hall. On his right, next to the statue depicting the god Darawk, stood Boragger, the dragon rod attached to his arm by twisted appendages that looked like the metal fingers of a skeleton. On the opposite side, Leur C'traeh smiled pleasantly. The elf had no weapons on him, yet his smile was enough of a threat. "Your two... friends broke into my home, and I am well within the law of our city to do with them as I please."

Standing in front of the dais were two priests of Darawk, recognizable by the identical tan vests both wore. One was in his late fifties, hair and beard a salt-and-pepper gray, his eyes a bright and steely blue. The other was a young pert woman, barely over twenty, light blue eyes that sparkled like sapphires in a pale, pretty face framed by halflong auburn curls of hair.

The former, Sage Demercur Ylvain, barely contained his anger when he said, “Dear Ceravin, although you are correct, I cannot recall this part of the city constitution ever having been applied. There is no precedence.”

“Oh, there is precedence,” Tangrain calmly offered. The permanent twitch in his eyes grew more pronounced when he turned to the elf. “Has the savage provided any insight?”

“None at all, I fear,” C’traeh answered in a voice that had only the faintest sing-song accent of his natural tongue. “His answers were disconcertingly empty of useful information. I would like the opportunity to question the wizard, he might be more forthcoming with the proper stimulation.”

The merchant shifted in his chair, cast a sidelong glance over to the Darawk scholar. “The barbarian resisted your... stimulation, C’traeh? I am shocked to hear that. Your reputation probably overrates your abilities.”

“Master Tangrain,” the elf said amiably, “my reputation is not my concern. Providing you with the answers is. And I do not appreciate your playing games. If you would prefer me to question the barbarian again, that is your wish. But he will need a few hours to recover from the first session, so the time might be well spent investigating the wizard. Unless you don’t mind Nych dying before he answers your questions.”

All the while Ylvain’s face had been growing tighter, the skin over his cheekbones whitening. “You are torturing these people!” he exclaimed and took a step forward. “Ceravin, I urge you to stop this and hand them over to the authorities. There is no call for reacting like this to a simple act of thievery.”

“Thievery?” Tangrain asked and arched an eyebrow. “Considering the fact that one of the two thieves accompanied you yesterday, when you requested an object I own, there is more at hand, I think. Oh, and by the way, how did you learn that the so-called thieves are kept here? I am not in the habit of publicizing any arrests made in my home. Well, honored sage?”

The last two words were dripping with sarcasm that cut through Ylvain like a knife, as much as the insinuation that the scholar had sent Nych and Barandas on their errand of thievery. But if Tangrain had thought to upset Ylvain, he had miscalculated. His face steadied all of a sudden, and he nodded gently. “A suitable question, Ceravin. Unfortunately for you, it is easy to answer. The young wizard borrowed an item from our library which bears a magical stamp. The stamp’s resonance is located in your home, therefore Barandas is probably here as well. Which you have subsequently proven, by the way.”

Neither of the men on the pedestal showed any reaction. Tangrain smirked. “You mean to say, he stole from you as well? Borrowed is such a loose term. But I fear that I have no more time for this pleasant conversation, honored sage. As you know, there is still some business to be taken care of. Who knows? Maybe afterwards, we would best have words again? Sylasa, please show the honored sage and his charming companion out the door.”

From a dim, shadowy area aside from the statue of Alyssa, the warrior woman stepped forward. Ylvain shook his head. “No need, Ceravin, I know the way.”

“Nonetheless I insist,” Tangrain said and waved to Sylasa. “Oh, another thing, honored sage. It is amusing to see you come here with new companions every day, yet I very much hope that the next time I see your current associate, you will still be by her side.”

The scholar’s eyes contracted, as he snorted and turned around. “Let’s go, Aurelyn. There’s nothing left to say.”

The priestess gave a curt nod then followed the elder priest out the hall, casting an intrigued glance at the silverclad Sylasa walking beside them. Neither said a word as they traversed the corridors towards the entrance. A guard jumped to attention when he saw Sylasa, quickly swallowing something while he pulled open the heavy oak door.

Ylvain was about to hurry through, into the sweet late afternoon air of Chazevo, when the priestess stopped and looked at the Ibrollenian warrior woman. “You are a long way from your home, aren’t you?” she asked. “In more than one way.”

Sylasa folded her arms before her chest and nodded gruffly at the door. “The Master told you to leave, and leave you will.”

A smile whisked over Aurelyn’s face. “Yes, lady, we will leave,” she said and enjoyed the sudden frown on Sylasa’s face. “But there’s a reason for your presence. I hope that it is the right reason, no matter what appearances claim.”

“I do what I do, Aurelyn Mutean,” Sylasa answered with surprising softness. “You may rest assured of that.”

The priestess nodded gravely. “That relieves me greatly, lady.” With that she turned, took the hand of the astonished Ylvain and guided both of them onto the street. The door slammed shut behind them.

“What in all the Gods’ names was that all about?” Ylvain whispered urgently, as always careful not to be overheard. “Are you forgetting that there are two boys about to be tortured to death in there?!”

Aurelyn shook her head slightly, patted invisible dust off her robe and pointed down the road. Quietly both walked across the marble walkways. The sunlight was mostly blocked by a thin layer of clouds, painting shadowy figures on the polished marble. After a while the priestess stopped and bowed to the elder cleric. “Forgive me, honored sage. It was not my place to speak, and I undermined your authority.”

“You are talking in riddles, child.” Ylvain wiped his hand over his forehead and sighed. “If you think there was a point to your conversation, that was fine. You should have learned that much from me by now. I haven’t yet grown so old and crusty that I love authority more than the truth. Or do you think so?”

“Absolutely not, honored sage!” the priestess replied hurriedly. “I shall immediately write an essay on it upon our return to the academy, and it will be on your desk by the morning!”

Ylvain stared at her, baffled. Her eyes were wide open, fear glistening in these bright blue lakes – and suddenly the sage laughed softly, just as her façade of terror broke apart. “Great lord of knowledge, I probably needed that.”

“Probably,” Aurelyn agreed. “You *were* a dictator in every class I have attended. And I *did* have a point in the conversation. I don’t know if I succeeded but... What are your plans, honored sage?”

He frowned and scratched his chin. “That’s a good question. I can’t allow these boys to die. They must have had a good reason for breaking into Ceravin’s house, and Darawk knows that my dear ‘friend’ is anything but a law-abiding citizen. Well...”

“There is not much time to decide,” the priestess interjected. “According to the elf, he will torture the barbarian again in a few hours. So, what shall we do, honored sage?”

“We?”

Aurelyn nodded honestly. “I have taken the vows, haven’t I? That means I have as much right to choose my path as you have. Even if it should prove a path of danger.”

Creases furrowed his forehead as the old scholar sighed again. Time flew by so quickly. Aurelyn was no longer the little girl with the pigtails in his history class, the one that was fidgeting all the time, playing around – only to confuse her teacher when she knew all the answers. “Let’s hope I find another way,” he said, and they continued their way to the academy.



The dampness and cold of the cell invaded Cornell’s body. His muscles still felt as if they belonged to another person, but they reacted to his commands. Jerkily, but they did react.

“Sometimes,” Barandas muttered as he helped the Cayaborean sit up on his bunk, “I wish there was a priest around when you need one.”

Boragger hadn’t had the wizard taken to the elven torturer. His men had simply thrown Cornell into the cell, slammed the door shut and left. Several hours must have passed since then, judging by the twilight outside of the windowlit. Most of that time, Cornell had lain still on his bunk, riding out the waves of pain crashing through him, while Barandas had sat worriedly beside him. Occasionally the wizard had walked over to the cell bars, taken a wary look outside and uselessly tested the strength of the lock.

At least that’s what it had looked like to Cornell. Somewhere in the back of his pain-addled brain he thought that this wasn’t the likeliest of behaviors, not for Barandas, anyway. The better part of his

awareness was focused on Sylasa, though. How could a woman that beautiful be that cold? She had to see that helping Cornell and Barandas was the right thing to do! They were imprisoned, tortured and about to be killed. Yet she ignored it, maybe took pleasure in it!

“Can you get up?”

Cornell shrugged and shook his head, only to regret the motion instantly when nausea swamped him. “Gotta give it a try,” he said slowly. Barandas grinned, then slung his arm under his friend’s shoulders and heaved carefully. Together they managed to pull the Cayaborean to his feet. For a moment or two, Cornell shifted his weight around, tried to find his balance, until he finally nodded to the wizard to let go of him. The support of his arm slowly disappeared – and Cornell nearly fell backwards. His right leg swung forward, caught the bunk – yet he managed to stay upright. “It’s... all right,” he panted, aware of Barandas’ suspicious look. He took a deep breath, then stepped back from the bunk into the middle of the cell. His head was swimming somewhere apart from his body, pain shot through him with every motion. But he stayed on his feet. “I’m fine.”

“Good,” the wizard grinned. “I didn’t want to carry you all the way out of here, anyway.”

“What?! You... have found a way out?”

“Told you we’d been in worse scraps, didn’t I? When are you going to learn to trust your old friend Barandas?”

Another wave of dizziness assaulted Cornell, as he grunted, “About ten weeks after burying you. Provided you don’t dig your way out again.”

“I’m insulted.” He didn’t sound that way at all when he stepped over to the bars again and dug something out of his tunic that Cornell recognized. The metal idol depicting an alreu with unusually large hands. Barandas had retrieved the item from the Darawk academy and used it to create gloves that could stick to any surface. “We’d best thank the tides of magic your buddies here didn’t search us too closely,” the wizard beamed. “Without this little beauty here, we might be stuck in here.” He glanced quickly between the bars to spy any guards, then he pushed a hidden button on the idol and presented it with a flourish to Cornell. The bottom of the idol had sprung open, sliding out an assortment of tiny lockpicks. “Hah!”

Cornell frowned, slowly walking up to the wizard. Fortunately it was a very short walk, yet he was feeling that the nausea was slowly subsiding. “Why...” He stopped, had to swallow down bile before continuing, “Why haven’t you used it before? We could’ve been out before –“

“Magical alarms,” Barandas shrugged. “I’ve been checking on them ever since we got here. There’s one on the hole they call a window, and there’s a couple in here. Or rather, they were. I had most of them disarmed while you were gone and took care of the rest while you were trying to keep your last lunch in your stomach.”

“Charming,” the Cayaborean grunted. “Open the lock.”

“Are you sure you can run? We might have to.”

“Open it.” *Running is better than lying on C’traeh’s granite table. Dying in a fight is better than another session with that elf.*

The picklock glinted in the weak light falling through the window slit as Barandas snaked it through the bars and inserted it carefully into the lock. Cornell heavily leaned against the bars, holding on to their support tightly. He probably could have kept his balance by himself, but why drain your strength unnecessarily?

Barandas twisted the picklock around a few times, then he touched a few of the tiny instruments, changing the configuration of the device. It seemed as if the alreu idol was smiling proudly at the wizard. If so, it bore little comparison to the wicked grin on Barandas’ face. “Just a little bit more, baby... Yeah, that’s... it!”

At the last exclamation, something clicked audibly within the lock, its bolt retracted, and Barandas pulled the door back slowly, trying to avoid any traitorous creaks. Grandly he then gestured at the door. “And once more Barandas the Magnificent delivers!”

There was no sign of any guards about, no cries of alarm. It hardly would stay that way for long, Cornell knew, and took a deep breath. “Let’s go,” he muttered as he let go of the bars.

Barandas stepped out of the cell, onto the first block of stone – and the stone sank an inch into the ground with a loud clicking noise. His gaze swiveled automatically down, the grin frozen on his face. Hardly a breath was taken when two gates crashed down a foot each from the door, heavy metal cell bars that blocked the corridor.

Cornell couldn’t help but laugh. A laugh that he regretted since it choked in his throat. “Barandas the Stupid,” he coughed, “checked for magical traps but forgot the physical ones.”

“Bloody –“ The wizard kicked the stone he was standing on. The stone did not appear to be harmed at all by the kick. “How should I have known about this? The bloody guards have been stepping on it all the time, and so have we, by the Tides of Magic. There shouldn’t be any –“ He stopped suddenly and stared down the corridor.

“What is it?” Cornell asked, slowly following the wizard into the impromptu second cage. “Guards?”

“Close,” Sylasa’s voice answered. A few yards away from them she was, resplendent in her silvery armor. In her hands she held a sword, a bastard sword with a beautifully worked blade and an ivory handle carved from the tusks of a thymbair. *That’s my sword*, Cornell realized with a start. “There’s a lever out here that locks the stone in place. You can’t see it from inside, that’s why all the cells are on one side only.” She approached them, pointed to a lever inserted below a torchholder.

Her face held no emotion. *What does she want now?* Cornell wondered, constantly glancing at his sword. Did she want to attack them with that? How humiliating to be struck down by your own weapon. *And how silly to think about humiliation when you are about to die.*

“Well,” Barandas said innocently and clasped his hands, “that was instructional. Thank you very much, Miss Sylasa. We’ll be going back to our cell now, if that is all right with you.”

“No, it isn’t,” she said coldly and turned towards Cornell. “You can stand. Good. Can you hold something?”

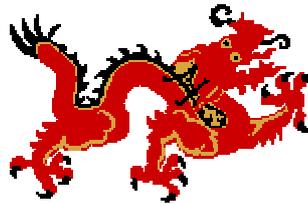
“Like what?”

“Like this,” Sylasa said and turned the sword around so its handle passed through the bars of the gate. Automatically Cornell took it, the familiar grip giving him a strange confidence. Barely had he taken the sword that Sylasa threw the lever down, reached out into a hole beneath it and started to pull on something. Whatever it was, it was connected to the gate inbetween them. Slowly it rose from the floor, slid along in grooves by their faces as the two stared incredulously at the Ibrollenian woman.

The gate reached its top point, and holding claws automatically clanked into place. In the dimness of the corridor you had to know that it was there to notice it. *Ingenuous*, Cornell thought.

“Are you going to stand around there all night?” Sylasa asked while she slid her quarterstaff off her back. “The elf will be sending his guards down here in a few minutes.”

Cornell shook his head. “Then we’ll be gone,” he muttered and gave his sword an experimental swing. He nearly lost his balance and cursed flatly. His senses weren’t yet back to their old strength – but he could feel them coming back together. Just a bit more...



Sylasa had taken point, a natural choice since she was rested and healthy, not to mention that she knew her way around the house better than Cornell and certainly better than Barandas. The wizard followed her closely, watching every move of hers – with delight, in fact. A tiny voice from the back of his mind reminded him that this was not the right time, but he had told the voice to look out for enemies by itself.

Cornell’s position in the back was also natural. In his frail condition he was hardly a match for any opponent they might meet. He also had to focus too much on keeping his feet moving silently; whatever awareness was left he spent on tracking his companions ahead of him.

It hurt to be this helpless. More than the injuries C’traeh had inflicted on him. Cornell of Cayaboré was used to being in charge, was used to being the one at the front, clearing a path for his fellows. And he liked that. Not being the one others look upon as the leader, that felt... wrong. Particularly when he hadn’t yet made up his mind whether to trust their current leader. Why had she let them out? Why hadn’t she helped him before, in C’traeh’s torture room?

They hadn't made it out the cell corridor without an incident. Sylasa had noticed the guard quickly and sauntered up to him openly, her hips swinging hypnotically. Their effect hadn't been lost on the guard, and the insipid smile had still been on his face after she had smashed her quarterstaff into his head.

After that they had taken the stairs to the ground floor. Torches had been flickering in the stairwell, their shadowy light creating a murky twilight. The ground floor, though, was brightly lit by the Modayrean lamp sticks whose oddly yellowish light left no shadowy corners. "I feel as if we're in a shooting galley," Barandas muttered.

Sylasa shot him a warning glance and put a finger to her lips. The wizard quieted down. She stepped away from the stairwell, checking both directions of the corridor. Nobody was in sight, but the corridor was short, turning sharply a few yards to their right and leading to a set of doors on their left. Somewhere down there was the great hall, and the stairs to the upper floors. They'd be full of guards, Cornell supposed. Unfortunately the exit was in that direction as well.

But around the corner to their right, they could get to the storage room. Not the one containing the valuable merchandise from Modayre, but crates of firelighters and other mundane appliances. It was also guarded, but usually less so than the other side of the house. Cornell had stood guard there a few times, so he guessed that the more inexperienced of Tangrain's men were assigned there.

He tapped Sylasa's shoulder, drawing her attention, then pointed in the direction of the storage room. She raised a questioning eyebrow, so he gestured crates and the typical motion of flicking a firelighter on. Her answer was a shrug. *That won't do us any good.*

"There's a gate outside," he whispered urgently.

She shook her head. "It's blocked by a magical spell, you know that. It can't be opened if you don't know the keyword."

"Well," Cornell paused to suppress a cough. "There's a wizard with us, isn't there?"

Sylasa didn't look at all convinced. "Powerful enough to break *that* spell?"

A good point, Cornell knew. As far as magic was concerned, Barandas had never been the sharpest knife in the drawer. Probably because he had spent most of his time at the wizardly college chasing girls or money rather than studying. Yet he did have a knack for breaking protective spells. "We'll just have to hope," he insisted, drawing an insulted look from Barandas.

Sylasa shrugged, and they went off to the right. She signaled them to wait as she stepped around the corner. "Clear," she whispered a moment later.

They followed the corridor a little further until they came to a crossing. Again Sylasa checked it first, but this time she waved down the hall unconcernedly. "Hello, there, boys!" she called and received a rowdy remark in return. "Now, now, not so fast!" she replied and stretched languidly. "I'll have to think about whether I wish to speak with you today..."

Barandas and Cornell were spellbound by her movements. Undoubtedly the guards down the corridor were the same – and probably coming closer. Did she have to call them? Cornell wondered. Could they really trust her?

“Keep your sword ready, pretty boy,” Sylasa whispered while stretching her leg and arcing her upper body back. A magnificent sight. Magnificent enough that it took Cornell valuable moments to recognize her words.

Almost too late he saw the quarterstaff flash all of a sudden, ramming into one of the guards and swiping him off his feet. The man yelped in surprise, his companion roared – and was cut short as the quarterstaff hit his groin. “Take the other one!” Sylasa shouted as she hammered her staff again in the second man.

The one on the ground was just getting up again, stunned from the sudden attack. Cornell knew him. Udeshta, wiry, young and inexperienced. Ordinarily a matter of minutes. Now he wasn’t so sure. Still, he swung his sword with all his strength.

Udeshta had become aware of him only moments before the sword would have hit, and he scrambled sideways. Cornell’s sword only caught empty air. The Cayaborean felt his balance slip, staggered forward, his hands stretching out, searching for a hold, anything.

He gave Udeshta plenty of time to get to his feet and draw his sword. “Die, bastard,” he cried and stabbed out. Cornell didn’t see the stab, but it wasn’t really necessary for at the same moment he had finally lost his battle with balance and fell to the ground.

Now Udeshta’s sword was in the air, and the young man practically leaned over Cornell. The Cayaborean’s head was reeling. He saw the sword, the hand and arm attached to it, the chest, and instinctively his own blade shot up. It was a good blade, and a lucky thrust, for it pierced the chain armor easily, sliding into the soft flesh beneath with a sucking noise. Udeshta’s eyes glazed over, blood covered his lips, then he collapsed on Cornell.

The dead weight of man and armor pressed down on his lungs and ribs, making him fight for every breath. “Get him... off...” Cornell pleaded, while his chest turned into a fiery cage burning up all the air he pressed in there.

After a moment that seemed to take an eternity, the weight vanished, and Barandas kneeled down by his side. “You got me worried there for a second,” he muttered. “Care to get up again?”

“Sylasa?” Cornell muttered.

Her soft voice answered gently. “I’m here. The other one’s dead, too. And you don’t look too far away from it.”

“Sorry... Just lost my balance, that’s... all.” He took the offered hands of Barandas and Sylasa and managed to get to his feet again. Nausea invaded him once more, but this time it would not leave. Bile rose into his mouth, he gagged, and Sylasa quickly bent his upper body forward – just in time for Cornell to vomit. It seemed to take an eternity, an eternity of pain racking his torso.

“Bloody –“ Barandas cursed.

That cold son of a bitch, Cornell thought – and was suddenly glad he hadn't spoken aloud when he saw the red streaks in his vomit on the ground. Bloody it was indeed.

"We have to get him to a healer fast," Sylasa said. "You'd better manage to crack the spell, or Nych is dead."

The wizard didn't reply. Instead he slung his arm under Cornell's shoulder again, giving the heavy Cayaborean all the support he could muster. Sylasa nodded curtly, then she took the other shoulder, and the three set out again for the door to the storage room.

It wasn't far off, just passing through two rooms that were mercifully empty of guards. Cornell had no idea how long they needed to get there. Nauseated, every now and then gagging drily, he was slowly losing conscience. At one point he thought he was back home again, flying on Tempest, trying one of those reckless maneuvers that had gotten him in trouble with Hydrochyll. But he loved them, and Tempest always cried her hoarse victory shouts during one of those mad rolls.

Then he was back in Tangrain's house. Before them was the door to the storage room. Oak wood, sturdy, but not barred. All they had to do was push it open, cross the room to the gate outside, then Barandas would magic it open, and they were free. That wasn't much to ask for, now was it?

Sylasa let go of Cornell, checking briefly that the wizard had enough strength to support the warrior by himself, then she walked up to the door and opened it. The door swung wide and...

... Boragger, the chief bodyguard, smirked cruelly at them. His right arm was leveled at them, attached to it the dragon rod, its maw glowing with the fire it was about to spit. "This is the end of your escape, Nych," he began to say – and then stopped when he recognized Sylasa. "What are you doing here?" he exclaimed and added, "Don't you move, girl, I know how fast you are with that quarterstaff!"

"I won't," Sylasa said cautiously, her eyes inevitably drawn to the rod's maw.

Behind her, Cornell felt as if the last ounces of his strength were fading away. *Not again, not again caught by Boragger*. That was all he could think, in silly repetitions. Barandas held onto him with desperation, otherwise the warrior would have slipped to the ground.

The bodyguard slowly stepped forward, his rod trained on Sylasa all the time. "I misjudged you, girl. Damn, I thought you were one of us!" He spat, his features turned in disgust. "You could have had a good life here. Better than anywhere else, I'd have made sure of that."

Sylasa smiled suddenly, her sweet, intoxicating smile. "Would you? I never – why, Boragger..." She blinked, stuttered, took one step forward – and was stopped abruptly when Boragger raised the dragon rod.

"Don't go trying that on me, girl," he growled. "You never cared about me. All you care about are fools like that savage... And you're gonna join him in death. Right about now."

Her eyes widened as Boragger's fingers slid towards the trigger in his palm.

Cornell had been blinking in and out of consciousness for a while now. Yet the image of Boragger and Sylasa had somehow managed to drill itself into his awareness. He saw the rod, saw the fingers

moving, heard the threat – and a roar left his throat. His muscles howled in pain as he tore free of Barandas' hands. He felt no pain, all had turned to a red sea of indifference. All that counted was Sylasa, all that counted was his jumping forward and –

The dragon rod fired. Bright lightning sparked across the few yards from Boragger, set the air on fire, and flaming, the lightning drilled into Cornell's chest. Where he had found the strength to leap in front of Sylasa, none could say. Moments before he had been a quivering mass of flesh and bones, barely able to support himself. Then, for a brief moment, he was in the air, a spirit of salvation.

And now he lay on the floor. The hole in his chest smoldered. Its edges were cleanly cut. On his face, still marked by pain, was a smile. He had bought his friends a little time. That was enough to die for.



A liquid was seeping from the stones surrounding the tiny window slit. It was a dark green, with bluish streaks, almost like the deep ocean. There was no source, it seemed more as if the stone was bleeding. Bleeding stronger all the time, to be exact.

Or perhaps not bleeding at all, but rather changing. As the liquid constantly grew, the stone appeared to shrink, to diffuse, to melt into the liquid.

After a moment the stone holding the bars of the window dissolved, and the bars fell clanking to the ground. A little later, enough stone had turned to liquid to form a passage around where the slit had been. The liquid stopped its flow, and gradually it stopped being a liquid as well. The green-blue became grayish rock. Again?

"It's safe now," a female voice said. "You can come out."

No answer came.

Then a head appeared in the hole, masked by a tight-fitting black hood and a darkly painted face. "They are gone," the head said.

"Then it appears," a male voice said, "we will have to go look for them. Help me with the package, please."

The head disappeared for a moment, then an entire black garbed body appeared and quickly slid into the cell. The woman held out her hands to the hole and received a rectangular package wrapped in dark leather. She laid it on one of the bunks, then she aided a man come into the cell as well. He wore similar clothes to hers, black as night.

The man took the package and slipped it onto his back. It did not fit very well, but it would have to do, he decided.

Meanwhile the woman whispered something in an arcane language, frowned and looked at an empty corner of the cell. "The resonance is coming from there."

"Good," the man nodded and sighed as he adjusted the package on his back again. "Oh, my, the troubles I go to..."



"NOOOO!!!"

Barandas' shout cleaved the silence left by the hiss of the dragon rod's fire. Sylasa stared at the body before her, at the wound in the man's chest. Her eyes were strangely empty yet at the same time full of a fire burning hot. "He gave his life for me," she whispered.

Boragger snorted. "So he went first, that's all. You're going to accompany him on his little trip to meet the gods." He chuckled and waved the dragon rod from one to the other. "Who's next?"

Barandas' face was distorted by pain and tears, his shoulders twitching. "For Cornell," he sobbed and raised his arms, his fingers twisted into claws.

"What?" Boragger guffawed. "C'traeh told me that you're no real wizard! What are you trying to do? Put on another light show?"

"Fireball," Barandas said softly. His fingers began to sweat profusely. But what appeared to be sweat the first instant flowed together in mid-air and caught fire all of a sudden. Two red balls of dripping flame hovered for the briefest of moments within the wizard's clawlike fingers, then they raced off, straight towards the petrified bodyguard. Boragger had time to throw his arms in front of his face, that was all he had left.

The fireballs impacted on the arms. Instantly Boragger's clothes went up in flames, but they were not the only ones. The burning substance spread quickly all over the body, growing in intensity until the chief bodyguard was a single, writhing flame. For seconds, the flame burned, then it winked out suddenly. The dragon rod clattered to the ground, apparently undamaged.

None of the others were even looking in that direction. Sylasa kneeled down to close Cornell's lifeless eyes. A tear ran down her cheek. Stumbling rather than walking, Barandas came over and toppled down by Cornell's side. "All my fault, all my fault," he mumbled. "I talked you into this bloody mess. Been in worse scrapes, eh, Cornell? All my fault..."

“Shhh.” Sylasa put a comforting hand on the wizard’s shoulder but he didn’t feel it. He closed his eyes, tears flowed freely, as he clawed his hands into Cornell’s chest. “All... my... bloody fault! I thought we’d just... sail out of here... like always, with that damn gauntlet... and whatever it was you’re after. And now you’re dead, and I don’t bloody want that bloody gauntlet anymore!”

Suddenly his tears stopped and he looked up. “I don’t want the gauntlet?!” he asked himself incredulously. “By the Tides of Magic, I’m an idiot! It’s a lousy, stinking gauntlet of bloody *resurrection!*”

“What?” asked a confused Sylasa.

Barandas rocketed up from his kneeling position, grabbed the woman by her arms and dragged her up. “We can resurrect him!” he yelled. “There’s a Modayrean item in Tangrain’s private collection that can do it! We can get Cornell back!”

The Ibrollenian woman looked at him as if he had lost his mind. She probably wasn’t far off the mark, considering the wizard’s wild eyes and the manic grin on his face. But the words echoed in her, the intensity of Barandas impressing itself upon her. “Resurrection?”

“Yes! It’s a gauntlet, I read all about it. Within three to four hours of the death, anyone can be raised back to the living. I’m gonna go up there, I’m gonna drag Cornell up there and pull him back if it kills me. You with me?”

She shook free of his clawing hands with a jerk. Confusion reigned on her face. First the barbarian had taken the rod’s lightning to save her. Then the wizard, the selfish, womanizing bastard of a wizard, had suddenly come up with an idea to save his friend, and no terror in the world would frighten him off.

Her glance fell on Cornell’s corpse. There was still the smile of satisfaction on his face. Dying to save someone else, that had been a small price to pay for him. The mark of a great man.

And who was Sylasa, warrior woman from Ibrollene, but a great woman?

“Two floors up,” she said and walked over to the dragon rod. With a flowing motion she bent down, picked it up and fastened it to her arm. The trigger pads easily fitted in her palm. Experimentally she aimed the weapon at one of the crates and pushed the pads down with two middle fingers. The bolt hissed from the dragon’s maw, sparked into the crate, tearing a deep, smoking hole into it. Still working. “That way, there’s a staircase. Let’s go.”



The biggest problem Barandas was facing a few minutes later was Cornell's weight. Sylasa and he dragged his body between them, and the wizard was starting to realize that he could not keep this up for long. His muscles were straining, and they had barely reached the first floor. What did Cornell weigh anyway? A ton?

As far as the guards were concerned, well... Smoldering heaps of ash rarely troubled the wizard. Any that had showed up invariably were armed with swords only, and Sylasa picked them off at a distance with her dragon rod. She was a dead shot, fortunately, the emphasis on *dead*.

It should have been easy now, he told himself. Just carry Cornell up to that second floor. But Barandas was so tired. So tired. Sweat covered his face, his body seemed like a single ache. All because of that weight on his shoulders, all because of...

Shut up! that annoying tiny voice in the back of his mind thundered. *One single time you are going to help someone.*

So bloody tired... He felt himself slump for a moment, breathing heavily. Sylasa stopped, glared at him, but he didn't realize. All he wanted to do was sink onto the floor and stop this whole charade. *I'm not a bloody hero*, he told the voice.

No, you're not. You're just a miserable wannabe wizard who's letting his best friend down all the time. Right?

Wrong. A snarl appeared on his face, he breathed deeply and shoved himself forward. "Just getting my second breath there," he told Sylasa. "No need to worry." Barandas was going to do this. He was going to ignore the pain, the protests of his muscles. Cornell was coming back. He would bring him back.

Step after step, they dragged Cornell up the spiral staircase. No guards were in here, but that was sure to change once they reached the second floor. It held the private quarters of Tangrain, and it was always full of guards. Barandas wondered how many there were altogether. Had to be more than a dozen – that many had already fallen prey to Sylasa's dragon rod or their other weapons. Or his fireball. The wizard still marveled at the fact that he had produced one. No, two. Never before had he been able to call up that much energy. Probably divine intervention, he grinned. *Yeah, right.*

"Hold him," Sylasa whispered.

Barandas sighed, leaned against the curved wall, hanging on to Cornell's body with all his might. They were at the second floor. Just ahead of them was the passage to the corridors, without a door. The yellow light of the lampsticks drew a perfect rectangle on the wall, as Sylasa crept up and peered carefully around the corner.

A fraction of a second later she rushed back out of sight. A crossbow quarrel flew past her and *clunked* against the wall. Cries of alarm were raised in the hall.

Sylasa smiled evilly. "You want it hard? I'll make it hard for you, don't fret, pretty ones." She dropped to the stairs, the right arm with the dragon rod above her head, and like a snake, languidly, she flowed towards the opening. The rod went around the bend first, her head a moment a later, and

she tapped the trigger. Again lightning flooded out, smashed its way down the corridor beyond and found its target.

Barandas heard someone yell in agony. He couldn't have seen anything, anyway, with sweat dropping into his eyes all the time. He was waiting for another yell – instead he heard Sylasa curse. “What... is it?”

She shot back into the staircase, slammed the rod into the wall. “The fornicating rod isn't working!” Again she slammed it against rock, adding a curse that would have made the wizard blush had he not been otherwise occupied.

“Maybe it's jammed?” Barandas suggested. “Try it again!”

“I'm going to,” she muttered, then she rolled back into the opening – and the rod fired. But this time, there was not only the hiss they had grown accustomed to, there was also a burping sound, as if the fire was stuck in the maw for a moment. “Clear! Come on!” Her left arm went around Cornell's shoulder again, and they set off once more.

The corridor was full of smoke, and it took Barandas a moment to notice that it was not only coming from the ashheaps that had been guards moments earlier but also from the dragon rod on Sylasa's arm. “The rod,” he grunted.

She shook her head. “I know.”

The wizard kept continually blinking by now. Sweat and smoke drove tears into his eyes, blurring his sight. He hoped that Sylasa could still see clearly. He really had no intention of running headlong into another group of guards. And he really wished Cornell was still alive so he could have stormed into any such group with his sword gleaming and soon crashing into the guards' bodies.

Suddenly he heard the burp and hiss of the dragon rod again. “One down,” Sylasa commented drily. Apparently she could still see clearly, Barandas thought.

He stumbled along, thinking that one clerical healing could recharge him enough that he could easily carry Cornell through. “Never a priest around when you need one,” he muttered.

“That can be helped, young friend!” a voice shouted from behind them. Suddenly Barandas felt all of Cornell's weight shifted to him, too much for him to bear, and he toppled to the floor, rolling around to see – barely – two black figures down the hall. “Don't shoot!” one of them yelled, and Barandas realized that Sylasa must have pointed the dragon rod at them.

“Why shouldn't I?” she snarled at them.

“We're here to help you,” the smaller one yelled – a woman. “Lady, you know us!”

The wizard rubbed his eyes quickly with his sleeve. Sylasa lowered the rod, and the black figures came closer. He must have been going mad, he decided, since he was sure the male was Demercur Ylvain, recognizable despite the blackface. And the other one, she was one of his assistants, wasn't she? Aurylen... something... And she knelt down beside him, produced a flask and sprinkled the contents on Barandas' face. The cool liquid felt strange, and even stranger when the priestess

whispered something. For a moment the liquid burned, then – he felt stronger, healthier again. Not much, but enough to think clearly.

“Are you all right?” Aurylen asked, breathing heavily after the exertion.

Barandas was about to nod, then checked himself. “No, I’m not. We have to get Cornell to the gauntlet. Sylasa?”

He looked about and saw that the warrior woman had received a dose of healing from Ylvain. She hadn’t needed much, keeping Ylvain in good shape. Healing always tasked a priest, and Darawk clerics were among the worst in that department. Sylasa looked closely at the newcomers. “Do you have any weapons?”

Wordlessly Ylvain drew a Roman *gladius* while Aurylen produced a Tonomai scimitar. Both were smeared with red.

Sylasa nodded. “Good. We’re going to need that.” Quickly she filled them in on what had happened and what they were planning. None of the priests commented, instead Ylvain grasped Cornell’s body and gestured for Barandas to take up his end again.

The wizard was in no mood to complain either. And he felt well enough to do it.

They were going to make it! Now there were four of them, and in a few minutes, Cornell would be back with them. *Watch out, Tangrain, you fornicating bastard! We’re going to tear down the house around you!*



Tearing down the house was taking a pretty long while, Barandas realized when they had located the private collection room of Tangrain’s. The dragon rod had been malfunctioning most of the time by now, and the guards had been starting to pile up. They had to run more than once – without the clerics and their healing, Barandas could never have hoped to drag Cornell fast enough.

Now, though, Sylasa and Aurylen had held off the pursuers for a few moments, buying Ylvain and Barandas enough time to rush into another corridor. The two women made a splendid fighting team, Sylasa in her silver armor, Aurylen in her tight-fitting tunic, and the wizard wished he had the time to enjoy the spectacle in the proper fashion.

Half an hour after the clerics had joined them, they finally barreled their way into the treasure room. Ylvain immediately let go of Cornell, and together with the women, he slammed the door shut, then they tipped over a nearby cabinet and shoved it in front of the door.

Barandas meanwhile was once more buried by his best friend's corpse and fought to snake his way out. When he had managed it, his conviction of victory was finally starting to wane. There was no other exit aside from the door they had come in through. And the room was large. Large enough to hold dozens of crates and cabinets along the walls, and an uncountable number of display stands scattered artfully around the room itself.

How was he to find the gauntlet here? The exit was blocked, but how long would that hold? There had been so many guards after them, and too few of them had they been able to kill or injure out of a fight. No doubt they'd come crashing through the door soon, and then... Then what?

"Sweet lord of knowledge!" Ylvain exclaimed. "Look at all this! That son of a crustmaw Tangrain has been collecting half of Modayre!"

"Start searching for the gauntlet," Sylasa said calmly and proceeded to do just that. A moment later, Ylvain shook himself out of his reverie and joined her. Aurylen did the same, as well as Barandas once he had fought himself back onto his feet. The priest had probably been right, he thought after a few minutes. Half of Modayre, at least. He had no idea what half the items on display here were, their odd structure and markings a complete mystery to him. Of those that looked somewhat familiar, he wondered whether they truly served the functions he assumed.

Whatever it was, he knew he was in a treasure trove. Magical appliances *everywhere*! An incredible fortune, ripe for the taking! Oh, by the Tides of Magic, if only he could have taken all of this to a safe place and reveled in it for himself. The sheer thaumaturgical power assembled in the room alone assaulted him like a tiger.

No time, that pesky voice in his mind complained.

"No time," he agreed with a sigh and slammed the stands aside, plowing his way to some he hadn't inspected yet. All around him were noises of equal destruction, swords smashing open locks, checking the contents, and grunts of disappointment when no gauntlet turned up.

Desperation welled up in Barandas – when he saw the gauntlet.

And it was beautiful. A single stand was reserved for it, its top shaped like a hand to perfectly display the item. It was made of a silvery metal not unlike Sylasa's armor, but dark markings were imprinted on its back, and at the root of each finger, there was a jewel embedded. Three were glowing brightly, in glorious red, while two were a dim ruby color, like drying blood.

"I found it!" he yelled and rushed forward to snatch the gauntlet of its stand. The metal was cool, as cold as ice, but he didn't care. As fast as he could he slipped it on his hand, flexed his fingers briefly to make sure it was a good fit.

Then he rushed back across the swathe of smashed stands and appliances he had carved behind him, to the body of Cornell. "You're gonna thank me for this a long time, buddy," he grinned and pointed the gauntlet at the corpse. "Rise from the dead!" he yelled and fed the gauntlet all his willpower.

Nothing happened.

By now the others had gathered around him. “What’s wrong?” Sylasa asked angrily. “Don’t tell me you have no idea how to work this thing?!”

“I –“

Ylvain stepped forward and took Barandas’ gauntleted hand. “The markings,” he explained, “are instructions in the Modayrean language. Just a moment...”

He frowned, making sense of the letters on the gauntlet. Meanwhile noise was issuing from beyond the door, the crashing noise of something battering the door.

“They are coming.” Sylasa nodded to Aurylen, and the women moved towards the door, quarterstaff and scimitar at the ready.

Barandas swallowed hard. The noise was getting louder. “Hurry up,” he urged the scholar.

Ylvain didn’t reply. His frown increased – then a radiant smile covered his face. “My, this is so simple! Barandas, the jewels on the fingers indicate how many charges there are left in the gauntlet. You have to select which jewel to use, by simply pushing it. It’s still set for the last time it resurrected someone, one of the dark jewels. Just push another one and lay it on Cornell’s chest!”

The wizard spared not even the time for a curse when he pressed the central jewel down as hard as he could. It easily slid down a bit, clicked into place, and began to glow brighter than before. An unearthly, blue fire was burning, and he could feel the entire gauntlet warming up. No, heating up. Quickly he fell to his knees and put his hand on the Cayaborean’s corpse.

As soon as the gauntlet touched the dead flesh, he could feel the heat dissipate. It began to flow down, into the body. And more and more was coming, following it. Streaks of blue light shot out of the gauntlet’s fingers, slamming like bolts of lightning into the body, growing in number every second, until thousands of writhing energy beams enveloped Cornell. They pulsated, weirdly dancing about, filling the air with an acrid stink.

The stink abruptly turned sweet. Just as fast the blue light vanished, and the gauntlet’s central jewel fell dark.

“Take your bloody hand off me, Barandas!” Cornell complained and smashed his fingers aside. “Robbing a friend now, is that how low you have sunk?”



“Bloody ingrate of a –“ Barandas yelled and laughed at the same time.

“Shut up!” Sylasa barked. “They’ve stopped hammering the door!”

Cornell blinked and wondered what in blazes was going on. There was Barandas with the oddest of gauntlets on his hand, giggling crazily. Next to him, there was Ylvain who just pulled a leather-wrapped package from his back and started unwrapping it hastily. A bit further, smashed display stands and objects were wildly scattered about. He saw a door, and there were Sylasa and a woman he didn't know, both armed and staring at the door which was barred by a cabinet.

Wait a minute! He did know the woman. Wasn't she that pert scholar he had met yesterday on the academy campus?

And, by the way, hadn't he just been dying on the way to the storage room?

Something hissed and howled from beyond the door.

"Take cover!" Sylasa screamed and dove to the floor. Instinctively everyone followed suit.

Just in time.

A bright stream of fire burned through door and cabinet, rushed like lightning through the room and flamed a dark stain onto the opposite side. Ashes flaked from what had been the entrance, smoke billowed up, and a dark figure stepped through.

"Well, well, well," Leur C'traeh said, his elven ears twitching. "If this isn't a sweet reunion. Would you care to stay on the floor or die on your feet?" Right behind him, another guard stood, a dragon rod attached to his arm, the maw glowing angrily. The guard was about to follow the elf when C'traeh quickly held up a hand. "Don't fire! You might hit the treasure!"

Cornell was the first back on his feet. "C'traeh!" he yelled, remembering all the pain the elf had inflicted on him with his damned poisoned needles.

"Ahh, you are fit again!" the elf exclaimed with a happy smile. "I was sure you had died! With all that –" He interrupted himself as he noticed the gauntlet on Barandas' hand, and raised an eyebrow. "Oh, I think I may have been right after all. Stay back, please, dear friends." The latter he said to the corridor outside where other guards were waiting. None had followed the elf thus far, and none would have dared disobey him now.

C'traeh shook his head, then he drew an elfwood sword from a sheath, "Well, my dear Nych, would you care to select a weapon from the collection?"

Sylasa jumped up, her quarterstaff at the ready, but Cornell cried, "No! He's mine!" She shot him an angry glance, then acquiesced for some reason and stepped back. Aurylen crept cautiously away from the scene, over to Ylvain who was still busy with his package. The priestess' back was smoldering where a burning piece of wood had hit her.

"Thank you," C'traeh said. "A meeting of champions, that's so... chivalrous. It is one of those fascinating notions humans have come up with. Personally I think it would serve my people well to learn from you in this one regard, don't you, Nych?"

The Cayaborean growled. "I don't care either way. And my name's Cornell. Cornell of Cayaboré."

“Is it? That makes it even more interesting. I had believed your tale of being a barbarian.” He bowed deeply. “You are an impressive man, dear Cornell. It will be a great honor besting you. Now, please take a weapon?”

Cornell looked about the scattered contents of the room. There were so many objects here. Most he couldn't identify even if he had months to study them. Which might have been weapons? Weapons that he could use?

With a wry smile Sylasa bent down and picked up a blade that she threw over to Cornell. “Take this, *Cornell of Cayaboré*. And hope that I like the Cayaborean as much as I liked the barbarian.”

He grinned instantly as he snatched the sword from the air. A bastard sword, just like the one he was used to, but it was even better forged, its weight balance as perfectly suited to him as he had ever known in a sword. The grip fit into his fingers easily, a bejeweled semispherical bar protecting his fingers. The blade felt as if it had been created just for him.

“Shall we?” Cornell asked the elf.

C'traeh nodded amiably. “Absolutely.”

The two men approached each other until they stood five feet apart from each other. C'traeh's sword lay easily in his hand, he was clearly familiar with it. And Cornell knew enough about elfwood not to underrate it. The edges were sharp enough to cut through steel. He wore no armor, so he had to rely on his own sword to parry the blows... and he suddenly realized that it would do little good unless it had been magicked to be more resistant.

They circled, watching each other closely to see who made the first move. Cornell knew he had to be fast, he had to dodge the elf as much as possible. *Don't take a chance with the sword!* Speed and agility, that was the only strategy he could use.

And then the fight began. Suddenly C'traeh lunged forward, swung his blade in a tight curve – and Cornell ducked and brought his sword up against the broadside of C'traeh's. The elf whirled back, returning to his original position, but Cornell wasn't finished yet. From his low position he leaped forward, tackling C'traeh head on.

They collided, the force of his leap carrying both men off their feet and sliding them into a crate. Both rolled sideways at the same time, both launched their swords at the same time – and both crashed together in the perfect center between them.

And Cornell's blade didn't break.

A *whoop* of joy escaped his lips, then he scrambled to his feet and launched another attack at the elf, his blade coming in a small arc, too brief for a proper defense. The blades clashed together again, but Cornell's sword tip nicked the elf's arm.

“Nicely done,” C'traeh commented, then his blade stabbed forward. Cornell leaped back, brought his sword down to parry the blow. This time he was too slow, and the elfwood scratched his stomach.

“Get him!” Barandas yelled. Cornell was too focused to fully understand what he had said.

He turned his attempted parry into a lunge, found himself blocked by the elf. C'traeh countered, was parried by the Cayaborean. Quickly a lethal dance developed, the blades swerving about like two airy dancers, clanging against each other every so often and occasionally drinking some of the opponent's blood.

Neither man was dominating the other, a fact that slowly began to dawn on the elf. His supercilious air broke down bit by bit, replaced by the stubborn desire to destroy his opponent.

And that, Cornell thought, would be his downfall.

The elf fought more hastily, less elegantly, went more on the attack instead of letting Cornell tire himself out. After a few more moments, it was Cornell who blocked most of the moves. Every now and then he feinted an attack, the feint was greedily swallowed by C'traeh who put all his strength into countering the blow.

The first few times Cornell didn't exploit the momentary openings. To be honest, he wasn't sure whether this wasn't a ploy of the elf's. But when C'traeh continued to grow hastier, he decided it wasn't.

He lunged forward, swinging his sword wide. C'traeh raised his elfwood blade to counter the blow, swinging it himself – and was caught surprised when Cornell's boot hit his chest and propelled him backwards. The elf staggered, automatically stabbed his blade forward to where Cornell had just been. The Cayaborean ducked under the blow, his own blade sailed forward, into the flesh of the elf. Blueish blood squirted from the wound. A bubbly moan escaped C'traeh's lips, as he looked down at the sword in a strangely calm way. "Ahh, this is... death," he whispered. "I had been wondering how it would feel. I am... looking forward... to meeting... you again."

C'traeh spat blood. The elfwood blade fell from his hands, and he soon followed it to the ground.

"Don't count on it, bluey," Cornell muttered. "I'm not planning to die anytime soon. Again."

Sylasa was suddenly by his side and grabbed his shoulders. "The guards outside have different plans for you. This way!" She shoved him backwards.

He turned around and suddenly realized that Sylasa and he were the only ones of their party still in the room. In the corner where Barandas and Ylvain had been, a shimmering mirror stood. A mirror whose rims were glowing in green fire that sent sparkles across the surface.

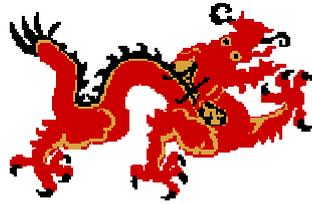
Tangrain's guards were just now realizing that the elf had lost his fight. Roars rose from them, and the first rushed into the room. Sylasa threw her quarterstaff at him, one end smacking him right on the head and into unconsciousness.

"Run!" she ordered, and shoved him again.

Not one to argue with sensible orders, Cornell ran towards the mirror. Instinct told him it was ridiculous that this could be some kind of exit. But what was the worst thing if he jumped into the mirror and all he did was break it? The guards would cure him of any feelings of ridicule soon enough.

He dove into the mirror.

The green light of the rim flashed over him, and then he felt himself dragged forward, completely intact yet smeared across an incredibly wide floor at the same time. And then...



“Thank the Great Lord of Knowledge that the Academy also has an impressive collection of magical appliances,” Ylvain smirked as he helped Cornell onto his feet. Behind him Sylasa rolled onto the floor of a small laboratory in the Academy. She had just entered the room completely when Aurylen spoke a word of command, and the green light winked off the mirror that was a perfect copy of the one in Tangrain’s mansion.

“Although,” Ylvain frowned, “I suppose that Ceravin now has part of this one as well. And I believe he might find out that I was there as well if I would ask him to return the mirror to me.”

Everyone was here, Cornell saw when he looked about. Barandas stood a little off, next to one of several shelves filled from top to bottom with glass beakers, jars and pots. The wizard was smiling, carefully and gently stroking the silver gauntlet on his hand.

And *here* seemed very much to be a safe place, well away from the mansion and Tangrain’s angry guards. Which left just one question on Cornell’s mind, albeit a rather large one. “Would someone please be so kind and *tell* me what happened?”

“Oh, sure thing!” Barandas grinned maliciously, receiving frowns all around at his eagerness. The frowns grew deeper when he proceeded to relate all that had occurred after the fight in the corridor, relishing the moment in particular when Cornell had died. The look on the Cayaborean’s face would have been worth a painting in oil, first the disbelief that turned abruptly into consternation as he realized the wizard was serious.

Barandas gave him little time to ponder the fact that he had been dead, but rushed on to tell of his fireball, his very first fireball. How he had thought of the gauntlet, how he singlehandedly had carried Cornell to the treasure room and resurrected him. And, oh, yeah, the others helped a little, too. Just a little.

Sylasa glowered at him. “You are pushing your luck, wizard.”

“Barandas the Magnificent needs no –“ he started, then checked himself. The Ibrollenian woman was just a bit too angry for him to carry on. “All right, they helped a lot. But it was still me who brought you back, Cornell, and you owe me.” He grinned. “Big time.”

The Cayaborean felt his mind reeling and needed to sit down. A nearby table was just in reach, and Aurylen cleared out a few items just in time. “I think,” he said slowly, “I owe all of you.”

“Pish-posh,” Ylvain smiled, tweaked his beard. “As far as I am concerned, it was worth it to put one over Tangrain. Dear Ceravin has been getting away with a little too much lately.”

Demurely standing beside him, Aurylen nodded silently. (Looking demure, Cornell thought, did not suit the priestess one bit, and he suspected it was a show rather than anything else.)

That left one more person in the laboratory. Cornell felt blood drain from his face when he turned to the Ibrollenian woman. “Sylasa, I... I’m sorry that I had to lie to you. I couldn’t have used my real name at Tangrain’s, and I had to keep up the act, so...” His voice faltered, he got back up from the table and walked over to her. “I am sorry,” he said, knelt down and looked up at her incredibly beautiful face. “Forgive me.”

“Do you think it can be that simple, Cornell of Cayaboré?”

Her voice was as cold as he had ever heard, ice grating over steel, with the ice winning – yet there was something else in there. Something that made him smile. “Yes, I absolutely do.”

She nodded slowly. “Yes, you probably do think so.” And slowly the edges of her lips swerved upward into the beginning of a smile.

Before the smile could fully form, Ylvain coughed politely. “Now *I* am sorry to interrupt, but I fear that we have not quite finished. Tangrain is a vengeful man. By now he will be sending out his men to search the city for you, and there are plenty of informers around he keeps well paid.” He shrugged. “I suppose you could stay at the Academy for a few weeks, but I doubt that will be in your interests. Cornell, you *do* have to go home, do you not?”

The urgency of the scholar’s words impacted on the Cayaborean. He looked over at Ylvain, then back at Sylasa – and noticed the dragon rod still slung around her arm. “You’re right, honored sage,” he chuckled, sprang up and put his hand on the rod. “Can I have that, dar-, eh, Sylasa?”

The woman cocked her head. “It’s broken. What good could it do for you?”

“Some friends of mine might still learn from it, back home. Maybe,” his hand slipped up from the rod to touch her shoulder, “you would like to accompany me?”

Her eyes flared when she felt his touch. “Maybe,” she gently shook his hand off, “you need to learn a little more about patience. It might come in handy.” Sylasa stepped aside, unfastened the rod and handed it to Cornell. “We will meet again, Cornell of Cayaboré. You have my word on that, and until then... I’ll be watching you.” Fire burned in her eyes for a moment – then it spread to her lips that finally displayed a full smile.

Without saying another word she turned around and left the room.

Silence followed her exit. Cornell snapped the rod on his own arm, picked up the sword and turned to Ylvain. “Thank you, honored sage. For everything.”

Ylvain nodded. “You’re welcome, young man. But, much as I hate to spring this upon you,” he reached out for the table and picked up a sheet of paper, “this arrived yesterday by magiscribe.

Someone paid a bit of a fortune to send this message to over a hundred Darawk temples across the continent, hoping it would reach you.”

“For me?” Cornell frowned. It couldn’t be a message from his superiors. For one thing, they knew where he was, and for another they would never have sent a message. Not during a mission. He took the paper curiously and glanced at it. There were only a few words. Of course, he thought. Sending a message by magiscribe, you had to pay for each word and for each station it was sent to. The sender had preferred to reach as many temples as possible, after all.

And the message read,

To Cornell of Cayaboré,

Meet me in oasis Siddig, south Elfadil Desert. Urgent.

Gabe of Ryelneyd

“Urgent,” Cornell muttered and read the message once more to find some indication of why Gabe – the friend who had taught him about the tribe of Ryelneyd – had written him. But in those few words, it would have been hard to hide anything. “Well,” he shook his head, “that means I’ll be travelling by way of the Elfadil. Barandas, are you coming?”

“Who, me?” The wizard’s head snapped back. “Through the desert? With my frail constitution? Why, I’d be desert dragon fodder in a minute or two! No, I’ll be taking up the good sage’s offer to stay here for a little while. If it won’t encumber you, honored sage?” Barandas bowed modestly.

Ylvain shrugged. “Not at all, young man. You may continue using the room you have lived in thus far. And you can return the alreu idol, by the way.”

“Splendid,” Barandas smiled and ignored the final comment, instead bowed even deeper to Aurylen. “And how about you, revered priestess? Do *you* mind my staying?”

Across the table Aurylen raised an eyebrow, apparently not impressed by the wizard’s behavior. She shook her head, nodded amiably to Ylvain and Cornell, then she left as well. She still wore the black tunic accentuating her body, and the Cayaborean knew instantly that the desert hadn’t been Barandas’ reason for turning down his offer. “You’ll never change, you son of a goat,” he muttered.

Barandas shrugged and grinned. “Better watch your words! Remember, you owe me.” Then he waved him off. “Now go on, take your desert trip, and have fun in the sun, will you?”

“I will,” Cornell agreed, shook his head again, then asked Ylvain to lead him outside. Both men went out, one very happy to have had a successful and eventful night, the other already looking forward to what he would find in the desert.

Behind them, Barandas slowly walked to the door and closed it. “Spoilsport of an honest Cayaborean,” he grinned. “You’d only make me hand these over to Ylvain, eh?”

Smiling, he stripped off the gauntlet, laid it reverently on the table before he dug his hands into the deep pockets of his robe. One by one he began dropping five more objects on the table, of the most varied of sizes, and certainly the most varied of shapes. “You’ll have to forgive me, dear priestess,” he whispered, his eyes glazing over at the sight of the loot he had stuffed into his pockets at Tangrain’s,

just before leaping through the mirrorgate, “but I won’t have as much time for you as I would like. First I’ll have to figure out what these little thingies do...”

THE END
