

Excerpt 3 from

Gamer in a Strange Land

Being the first in the

Chronicles of an Elder Geek

7. Spring to Battle

As the winter snows finally started to ebb, activity in the fortress increased sharply. Every keg of powder was opened and checked for consistency and dampness. Unsuitable kegs—the few there were—were removed, the rest were laced with nails and iron scrap in preparation for use and resealed. Shamblers were sent to the cliffs to uncover the charge holes and pour kegs of gunpowder into them, then pack them down and recover them. Fuses were cut to length and segments tested. Slow burning fuses were prepared to touch off the bombs and the cliffside charges. The catapults were set up again, retested and re-ranged.

I saw none of this. I could only surmise it based on the winter planning I'd overheard and the sounds of activity near the laboratory. I'd also overheard that there was some concern that the Wardens would infiltrate the nearby mountains well in advance of the attack and perhaps detect what was going on. What was done about that I didn't hear.

I tried to learn what I could, speaking to R'khs'greech when the opportunity presented itself. At most times, he was reticent, saying that he wasn't privy to the plans. Still, he was employed in some of the preparations: placing fuses in barrels that shamblers could roll down the pass or carry into the face of enemy soldiers to obliterate both; running multiple fuse trains for the cliffside charges and covering them to camouflage them and protect them from weather; setting up blinds to conceal shamblers in key positions to set off those explosives with a mental command from Vulzhugar.

The waiting became unbearable. The long winter months were bad enough, but now the decision was at hand: any day, Harol-Dárim would begin his march, and soon he and his army would reach Kyrran's Gap. I would be freed or my imprisonment would lengthen indefinitely as Vulzhugar's power burgeoned and his new plots unfolded unopposed. More shamblers would be added to his ranks.

Every time I saw R'khs'greech I pressed him for news. He became quite exasperated, saying time and again that no, Harol-Dárim had not begun to move; no, he hadn't heard anything about when his army would march, only that it would be soon.

But I knew the day had arrived when Vulzhugar, Russell and four shamblers entered the lab. Vulzhugar had the thin, chill smile he affected when he was about to do something particularly vile. Russell looked less haunted; he was completely expressionless.

"So now your doom is upon you, Vulzhugar," I said. "Harol-Dárim comes to exact his justice."

"He and his minions will be a most welcome addition to my legions of shamblers. I'm of half a mind to let you watch, but I think it will gall you more to stay here and wonder what is happening."

"Master, we shouldn't keep our 'guests' waiting," said Russell.

"Indeed not, slave." The archmage gestured to the shamblers and turned to go.

Russell snapped a finger and thumb and said, "One moment, Master, I thought of one other thing."

Vulzhugar pivoted silently and said ominously, "Oh?"

"Well, if these Wardens are as stealthy as you say, they may have observed our activity on the West Tower. They may have archers approach by stealth to snipe at us with longbows. That could put them inside the catapult's minimum range, and while we could roll gunpowder bombs off the top of the tower, that would be a less than ideal solution. Explosions near the tower aren't good for it—or us."

"Oh? I find it disturbing and shortsighted of you to miss such an important detail. We could have used cauldrons of boiling oil to repel them, but you convinced me to replace those with the catapults."

"I admit my error, Master, and humbly beg you to punish me as is my due when your victory over your foe is complete.

But I may have a quick and effective solution. Is that red plastic gas can the Faceless brought with me still around? Properly sealed and stored?"

"Yes."

"If it can be fetched, along with glass bottles—empty wine bottles will do nicely—the gasoline, even months old as it is, can be poured in with soaked rags or ropes for fuses to make crude but effective firebombs. From the height of the tower, they can be thrown quite a distance, or dropped on the heads of closer enemies."

"My magic would have seen them. I've been watching the approach of the army in this manner for some time."

"A most wise precaution, Master. But is it possible that the foe can use magic to screen the approach of a small raiding party?"

Vulzhugar stood in silence for several moments before he admitted, "Perhaps. Very well. I will send shamblers to fetch these things." He leaned forward, looming over Russell. "I trust you have no other last minute details to tell me."

"None whatsoever, Master. Harol-Dárim is as good as dead."

"Either he is—or you are."

"That has been clear to me from the day I proposed this plan, Master."

Three shamblers summoned by Vulzhugar's magic appeared. Two carried crates of wine bottles and one carried the red gas can. They fell in behind the other four shamblers.

"Let there be no further delays. Come." Vulzhugar pivoted and glided to the iron door to the tunnel to the West Tower and opened it magically. Russell and the shamblers followed.

I was alone in the laboratory. As the footsteps of Vulzhugar and his minions receded, I was in an oppressive silence. Would I hear the distant explosions as death rained down on Harol-Dárim's army? Would I feel the rumble of the

tons of stone thundering down from the cliffs into the pass to crush my would-be rescuers?

I fretfully marked the passage of time. It seemed I was doomed always to wait, wait, wait! I swore to myself that if I ever escaped this place that I would find a way to destroy myself than to ever again be held prisoner in such a manner.

I struggled magically against the spells that prevented me from escaping, even though I knew the futility of the effort. I strained with all my arcane might, knowing that it might leave me vulnerable to later efforts by the archmage to finally break my will. I didn't care. Any effort, no matter how useless, was better than waiting.

And useless it was. I ceased, my strength spent, raging against my helplessness.

Then I heard three distant explosions, closely timed. No doubt the catapult bombardment had begun.

A moment later, I heard running footsteps approaching from the West Tower tunnel. I heard a thump and saw a flash of light down the passage.

Russell, chased by three shamblers not five steps behind, crossed the open doorway, grabbed the edge of the iron door and heaved it shut, then dropped the bar in place just as the shamblers hit the door. He ran for the other door, panting, and shouted.

“Fire in the hole!”

The world exploded.

It is not my preference to relate events second hand as there is always the question of the reliability of witnesses. Be that as it may, I feel obligated to relate what I believe occurred after Vulzhugar and Russell entered the West Tower tunnel and before Russell unexpectedly returned, even if it might lack in accuracy:

When they reached the base of the tower through the underground passage, Russell and the shamblers started climbing the ladders that led up through the several levels of the tower. Each level had kegs of gunpowder on low benches,

and the wooden floors were dampened to prevent stray sparks from whatever source from touching off any loose gunpowder. Fuses were set into each barrel, marked and ready to be cut to length so they would explode at the optimal time at the end of their flight from the catapults.

Vulzhugar, rather than taking the ladders, levitated slowly up the shaft that had been cut down the center of the tower. At the top of the shaft was a block and tackle designed to bring up three kegs at a time to be loaded onto the catapults. Three of the shamblers were ordered to wait below to load the kegs; the others followed Russell to the top. Vulzhugar had gotten there first and started casting defensive spells to protect the top of the tower from magical attack.

Russell first lit six slow fuses, smoldering pieces of rope that would be used to light the kegs just before the catapults hurled them. He laid them in an empty brazier. While the archmage wove his spells, Russell poured the wine from the bottles over the wall as he watched the pass below. Quickly, he affixed the pouring spout to the gas can and filled the empty wine bottles, then soaked pieces of rope in gas to use as wicks, folding over the end and jamming the double thickness of rope into the neck of each bottle. He had ten bottles finished and was pouring the wine from the next bottle when he said, “Master! I see movement nearby!”

Vulzhugar frowned and reached out with his arcane senses. “I see nothing. Are you certain?”

“No. But I know how to find out.” Taking the slow fuse, Russell picked up one of the firebombs, lit it, and flung it out toward the suspected location of the foe. “Fell short. Master, I think it is time to load the catapults.” He picked up another firebomb.

“Agreed.” Vulzhugar gave the mental commands to the shamblers waiting below as Russell lobbed the second bomb. “A bit to the right. This one should flush them if they’re there.” He picked up a third bomb and walked toward the shaft. “What’s taking them so long—”

And “tripped” over the gas can.

The can tumbled into the shaft. Russell narrowly avoided following it in by grabbing the rope on the block and tackle. His feet were still on the edge of the shaft, but his weight on the line jerked the tray, now laden with three kegs of gunpowder, into the shaft. Russell dropped the unlit firebomb into the shaft and it broke against the kegs.

Russell lost his footing and wrapped himself around the line as he fell down the shaft. As the tray rose toward him, he slapped the slow fuse against the gas-covered barrels, which burst into flame, singeing his hand. The tray continued up the shaft and Russell went down the shaft. The rope jerked to a stop several feet from the ground; Russell abruptly lost his grip and hit the floor. His spectacles dislodged from his face and slid into darkness. The gas can was on its side. Its spout had popped off on impact and a growing pool of the flammable liquid poured around Russell.

Meanwhile, the tray hit the top of the block and tackle and jammed, tipping out the burning kegs. Vulzhugar instinctively lashed out with magic to fling the deadly kegs off the top of the tower. Two of them arced out and exploded on impact.

The third just cleared the edge of the tower before it detonated.

The shambler closest to the blast was blown to pieces; another was flung off the tower and fell out of sight. The other two and the archmage were hurled toward the tower crenellations opposite the blast and struck them hard, their bodies chewed by flying metal.

A human would have been dead or dying. Vulzhugar and the shamblers were long past that; they quickly regained their feet. Vulzhugar ordered the shamblers in the tower to pursue and destroy Russell, then stepped into the open shaft and started to levitate down it.

Russell struggled to his feet, the smoldering slow fuse still gripped in his hand. Miraculously, he had managed not to

drop it or otherwise touch it to the petrol. He fled into the tunnel leading back to the fortress and Vulzhugar's lab just as the three shamblers slid down the rope, heedless of the friction burns on their hands and legs. The tray was somehow still jammed at the top of the shaft holding the rope in place. The shamblers reached the floor and loped after Russell.

They ignored the slow fuse he threw over their heads. It landed in the gasoline, which ignited.

The flames raced across the floor to the gas can, which exploded, dousing the room with runnels of flaming liquid.

No one knows for certain where in the tower Vulzhugar was when the kegs on the first floor exploded. The force of the blast went out and up, shattering the wooden floor of each level above and detonating the kegs there as well. The blasts cascaded up the length of the tower, hurling chunks of stone from the outer layer of the wall as they went, until they exploded through the roof, sending the wrecked catapults and block and tackle spiraling in flames to smash on the ground below.

The tower swayed for a moment, then slowly collapsed into a heap of rubble.

In the lab, the explosion boiled up the West Tower tunnel and smashed the three shamblers to fleshy ruin. The iron door they were battering blew off its hinges just as Russell jumped through the other door. The door spun across the room, destroying a workbench and smashing into the pedestal upon which I was imprisoned. The crysteel case was batted off the top despite the magic that held it there and was swept along with me to the floor.

The spells that trapped the pedestal triggered.

Everything in the lab still living died in agony: the few surviving lab animals and every insect unfortunate enough to have strayed within curled up, writhed and lay still.

The distant rumble of the collapse of the West Tower shook the room for several seconds. Then, except for the sound of shifting dirt or a falling pebble, all became silent.

Russell appeared at the other door and leaned heavily against its frame. Blood flowed from a cut on his head and from his abraded hands. He looked around at the destruction in the room, gave a banshee yell of delight and said, “Ooo-wee! That blowed up REAL good!”

8. Run Away!

Russell groaned, “Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever had such an adrenaline rush. I see the door took care of your prison, Mister Grimoire. It is safe to move you now?” he asked as he started rummaging around the laboratory.

“What just happened?”

“I blew up the West Tower and Vulzhugar with it. If he’s not dead again, I hope that it takes a long, long time for the little bits of him to dig themselves out of several tons of rubble. I, for one, do not intend to be here to find out. You want to come along?”

“You—destroyed Vulzhugar?”

“Hey, it was him or me. Look, I’d love to stay and chat, but I don’t know how many shamblers are out there hunting fresh meat, and I’d like to get out before they come looking. Hah! My stuff!” He said, pulling his backpack and other items from a low cabinet in one corner. He packed his computer and books and several other items into his nylon rucksack then limped over to the pedestal. “Do you need me to carry you?”

“No,” I said, “but it might be wise for me to conserve my magical strength, so perhaps it would be best if you did.”

“Right.” He scooped me up as R’khs’greech entered. The frit was wearing an old baldric used by his race to carry items. He had a small knife attached to it. He also was wearing a rucksack and was carrying a smaller sack with a drawstring, and he was holding a slow fuse in one hand.

“Hey, R’khs’greech, are the bombs in that backpack?”

“Yes, they are.” R’khs’greech chittered in glee. “Used a few to blow up shamblers guarding his treasure vault. Most valuable stuff is in this sack.”

“Good. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

The Faceless appeared in the intact doorway, stepped in and closed the door behind him. Russell and R’khs’greech turned and stared in shock.

I wrenched myself from Russell’s grasp and floated chest-high in front of him, and spoke to the Faceless:

“Your master is vanquished. Your service to him is ended. The spells that held me are gone. You know what I am and who made me. Depart now or I will destroy you.”

The dark and empty eye sockets of the Faceless stared at me, each glittering with its malevolent pinpoint of red light as the creature seemed to consider its options.

It removed a golden object from the folds of its cloak, the key shaped like a skull and skeletal arm and hand. The Faceless inserted the key in the lock of the door he had just closed, turned it and opened the door.

Instead of the corridor normally there, the doorway revealed a huge room hewn out of basalt weirdly lit by hanging braziers with green flames. The room contained row upon row of black, rune-carved sarcophagi, as far as the eye could see.

The Faceless removed the key, stepped through the door, and closed it.

That was my very finest bluff. I could never have prevailed, weak in magical power as I was at the time.

Russell said, “Hey! That was my only way back to my world!”

“Do you want to take the key away from it?” I asked.

“No, I’m just saying. OK, less talky, more walky. ‘We are *leaving!*’” he said, saying the last sentence in English and a deeper, rougher voice. Russell stepped to the door, paused, hesitantly turned the handle then yanked the door open.

The corridor leading out was there, and empty. I presume that he half expected to see the sarcophagus room.

“That’s just spooky. R’khs’greech, let me carry the loot and you carry the bombs; you’re a better shot than I am, especially without my glasses. Where the hell am I going to get new glasses on this low-tech world?” Russell came back and took the sack of loot from R’khs’greech then plucked me from the air.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Know what?”

“That R’khs’greech is a better shot.”

“We played wastepaper basketball. He won every time. OK, let’s go. Quietly.”

R’khs’greech knew the fortress best, so he led the way, running on all fours with the slow fuse in his mouth and the rucksack of bombs secured to his back. Once, as we navigated the labyrinth of rooms and hallways, he signaled Russell to stop and peeked around the corner. He stood up, reached over his shoulder and took out a small clay pot sealed with wax and lit the fuse. The fuse burned half its length in an alarmingly short time. The frit leaned out and flicked the bomb around the corner. He and Russell ducked down and covered their ears.

A sharp explosion rang out. A severed arm and head of a shambler—or two different ones—slid into the intersection.

Russell said, “I think you could have made them a little smaller.”

“You said, ‘use clay pots’. I used clay pots I could find,” R’khs’greech reproached.

“All right, all right.”

We continued our trek, and several minutes later reached the main entry. Again, R’khs’greech peeked from cover to see if the way was clear. It was not.

“Twelve of them,” he said. “That’s a lot. Might not have enough bombs.”

“We have enough,” Russell said. “We’ll lure them into a trap. Give me the one of the bombs and a piece of the slow fuse, then wait next to the door at behind us at the end of the hall. Make sure to throw *over* my head, got it?”

“Got it.”

Russell left me on the bag of loot next to R’khs’greech and stole quietly down the carpet in the center of the hallway. He lit the fuse on the bomb, leaned out and yelled, “Hey, zombies! Catch!” Hurling the bomb, he ran back down the hall and passed the frit as the bomb exploded.

“They’re all yours,” he told the frit.

The shamblers crowded into the hallway in pursuit as the frit’s first bomb landed at the feet of the leading ones. The explosion shredded them and the carpet and knocked back others, bowling them over.

“Wait for them to group up again if you can,” Russell shouted. “They’re too stupid to spread out or work their way around us.”

Following that advice, the frit used three more bombs to reduce the shamblers into masses of twitching viscera and severed, grasping arms. Russell grabbed a nearby candle stand and flipped arms out of the way so they couldn’t grab at us as we passed.

“This seems too simple,” I said as Russell heaved the bar on the door out of its brackets.

“Well, I tried to think of as many uses for the shamblers as I could,” Russell said, panting. “So Vulzhugar would spread them thin when I made my move. They may be fearless, powerful and loyal, but they’re dumb as a post and they follow orders rather literally. Without Vulzhy to lead them, they only react to blatant stimuli or follow the last orders they were given. I hope.” He pushed the door open enough for R’khs’greech, to look outside. “If Vulzhugar had used human guards we’d be dead. They wouldn’t have rushed us after we started using bombs; they would have trapped us

and sniped us with bows and crossbows until we ran out of them. But Vulzhy was never the trusting sort.”

“All clear,” said R’khs’greech.

“Right.” We emerged into the morning light. It was a bright, cold spring day, although the sun had not yet risen high enough to shine into the mountain pass. Still, it was a sign that on this day a dark blight had been cleansed from the land. The oppression of years of captivity lifted from my soul. R’khs’greech sniffed the new morning air with excitement; he looked as if he were about to do somersaults. I could sympathize; he had been here even longer, although he had much more freedom of movement than did I.

In the light of day, Russell looked tired and old. He was limping from the battering he’d suffered so far and his breathing was labored from his exertions. R’khs’greech looked back in concern, but said nothing.

Russell gazed at the switchback path that led from the yard in front of the fortress down to a pair of towers connected by a short wall next to the chasm. This was the barbican. On the other side of the chasm, I saw a large, empty wagon that was used to carry gunpowder kegs.

I also looked to where the West Tower was—or used to be. It had been entirely demolished, not one stone in its original place. The greatest archmage could not have wrought so quick and complete a destruction.

Rubbing his eyes, Russell sighed. “We still have the barbican and drawbridge to cross. How many bombs do we have left?”

“Two,” said R’khs’greech.

“Not good. The barbican is guarded, the portcullis is down and the drawbridge over the chasm is up. The chasm will take too long to climb—even if we had the gear and skill to climb it safely—and we have no bridging equipment. The shambler guards are stupid but strong; if they catch us they’ll rip us apart.”

“Perhaps at this point we should stop and await rescue,” I suggested. “Harol-Dárim’s army is not far away, and they can make short work of the barbican.”

“Normally, I’d agree,” said Russell, pointing down the pass. “Can you see that red rock over there? It’s distant, but you might be able to make it out.”

After further direction, both R’khs’greech and I saw it. “Vulzhugar has a failsafe in place. When the first banner of Harol-Dárim’s army passes beneath that rock, shamblers will detonate the cliffside charges even without a direct order from him.

“Maybe the charges won’t go off. Maybe the resulting avalanche won’t be as destructive as I think. Maybe the shamblers will fail, for some reason in their pointy little heads, to touch off the charges, even though we tested them. Maybe the Wardens have found the hidden Shamblers up there and chopped them to bits.

“But if those charges trigger as planned, a lot of people are going to die.

“The shamblers shouldn’t trigger them if we pass it first, since we won’t be carrying those banners. But we have to get there first.”

“Why didn’t you mention this before?” I said angrily.

“Frankly, I didn’t expect to get this far. You can levitate; can you lift R’khs’greech over the chasm? He could warn the army.”

“Most humans are not like you, D.B. They would likely just kill me. They won’t listen to me.”

“OK, so maybe the grimoire could levitate over and warn them.”

“To be honest,” I said, “When I warned off the Faceless I had just about enough *wiir* left to levitate myself there. I’m willing to try if you both insist, but I’d likely fail and send R’khs’greech or myself plummeting into the void.”

“So you faced off against the Faceless with no face cards in your hand? Heh. Well, any plan that contains the word

‘plummet’ is probably not a good one. So we try something else.” Russell thought for a moment.

“The barbican’s drawbridge is counterweighted to close if the chains are detached. These chains and the mechanism are entirely within the barbican. We can’t cut it or lower it without taking the place.

“But because the drawbridge is counterweighted, the winch isn’t blocked when it’s up—there’s no reason to since it can’t lower as long as the counterweights are in place. So all we need to do is attach a weight to the top heavier than the counterweights.”

“How are we going to do that?”

“Well, the stables might still have a cart or wagon with handles in front that the shamblers used to move cargo around the place. We could take one down, fill it with rocks or something, tie a thick rope to it and to the top of the drawbridge and push the wagon into the chasm. Assuming it all held together and weighed more than the counterweights, it will pull the drawbridge down and we could run for it. The barbican isn’t flush with the edge of the chasm; that would make it harder to repair the walls facing it, so we don’t have to climb the cliff face to get to the drawbridge. It’s there to house and protect the bridge and its mechanism; the chasm keeps enemies out. With luck, the shamblers won’t even be looking in our direction. There’s an army coming up the pass, after all; I can hear their drums even at this distance.”

“We haven’t much time,” I said. “Whatever we try, it should be done now.” Russell and the frit started toward the stables. They got a pull-cart of moderate size, normally pulled by a pair of shamblers, a large sheet of canvas stiff with age and as much rope as they could find. The canvas and the rope went into the cart.

“R’khs’greech, I’ll pull the cart, its tongue is a bit high for you to get leverage. But you’ll have to climb the drawbridge and secure the rope. While you’re doing that, I’ll be loading the cart with loose rock as fast as I can and lashing it down.

When all is ready, the cart goes into the chasm and we go across the drawbridge. Let's go."

Even empty, it was a chore to work it down the switchback. Russell was panting by the time he pulled the wagon near the edge of the cliff east of the barbican with the tongue pointing toward the chasm and the wheels blocked. He started piling rocks into the wagon as R'khs'greech dumped the rope and canvas out the back.

"Take what rope you can carry and get it secured. There's a gap between the planks on the eastern side, loop the rope through there. Use the best knots you know to secure it to the drawbridge; they have to take the shock of a wagon full of rocks yanking on them. Then trail the rope back here and we'll attach the cart."

This was done more easily than I thought: the shamblers, if they saw us, didn't interfere. I suppose they had no orders to meddle with other servants of Vulzhugar performing labor, or that they didn't understand what was happening if they saw it.

R'khs'greech left behind his rucksack and, carrying a large coil of rope, scampered nimbly along the edge of the cliff in front of the barbican. Using his short claws, he dug into the wood and worked his way up the drawbridge and looped the rope around the thick gapped plank and tied it firmly in place. He slid back down the rope and trailed the rest of it back toward the wagon, retrieving another loop to splice to it when it fell short of the wagon.

In the meantime, Russell was throwing rocks into the wagon as fast as he could with no attempt at stealth. His face was pasty and drenched in sweat despite the cold morning air and his chest was heaving. R'khs'greech finished securing the ropes to the wagon and helped fill the wagon.

"OK," panted Russell. "That should be enough. Let's get the canvas on and tie it down with all the remaining rope. I want to loop around the entire wagon, side-to-side and front to back. If the rocks fall out this won't work."

The frit did most of the work; Russell could barely stand and leaned on the wagon much of the time. When the canvas was bound tightly, Russell sat down and said, “R’khs’greech, I need you to take the grimoire. We have no more time and I can’t keep up anymore. The two of you will have to go on ahead, I’ll wait for rescue.”

“I do not think that is wise,” I said. “We don’t know the shamblers won’t kill you if you remain and I fear for your health in any case. If you can just get across the drawbridge it should be safe to rest. The priests of Hælos traveling with the army and the priestesses of Aldyth, if present, are capable of healing magic. Perhaps if you left your backpack behind—”

“I need this stuff. Aside from being all I have left from my former world, some of it is useful and some, I hope, can be made useful again. It can’t be replaced.”

“Neither can you,” I pointed out.

“I will not leave you,” R’khs’greech said. “I will wait with you. These other humans are nothing to me. You destroyed he who butchered my clan, that vile thing that carved my sister’s heart out while I watched. I will not leave you!”

“All right, all right, I’m going, I’m going.” He swayed to his feet, shouldering his backpack again. The frit donned his rucksack with the two remaining bombs, picked up the loot bag and me. Russell kicked the rock under one wheel away; R’khs’greech removed the other. The wagon started to roll.

“Don’t go until the rope is off the cliff, you don’t want it to catch you and sweep you with it.” The wagon disappeared over the edge, rolling and crashing down the steep side, and rope attached to it whipped off the cliff beyond it.

“OK, go!” said Russell and shuffled more than ran along the cliff with R’khs’greech in the lead.

The rope pulled entirely off the cliff edge and went suddenly taut. The drawbridge, ever so slowly, began to open.

“Shoulda added more rocks,” wheezed Russell. “Come on, you sonvabitch! Drop!”

The wagon swung out from the cliff and the drawbridge descended faster. R'khs'greech reached the drawbridge well ahead of Russell, then waited and the man struggled to catch up.

The drawbridge finally came down as Russell reached it; the wagon dangled below it, colliding with the other side of the chasm. The incurious shamblers atop the walls of the barbican looked on but did nothing. Russell and the frit started across.

Then the shamblers did react. As one, they gave a deep, wailing moan.

“What in hell was that?” gasped Russell, striving to move faster.

“The shamblers have raised the alarm,” I said. “Apparently, Vulzhugar gave orders for them to do so if you or the frit or both crossed the drawbridge.”

“Damn, they’re raising the portcullis! Move!”

Behind the portcullis, half a dozen shamblers were waiting for it to raise enough to get under it. They were pulling up on the bars to try and move it faster.

R'khs'greech made it to the other side of the chasm as Russell reached the middle of the bridge. “R'khs'greech!” he shouted. “Bomb! Portcullis! Throw!”

The frit threw, putting his whole body into it as if it were a whip. The blast bowled over the shamblers. Two of them still had feet to stand on when the smoke cleared.

Russell made it across and collapsed. “Cut the rope. Cut it now,” he coughed.

R'khs'greech used the knife from his baldric to saw through the rope, sending the wagon crashing to the bottom of the chasm. The drawbridge snapped up and slammed into the two shamblers that had just gone under the portcullis.

“They’ll lower it soon,” gasped Russell as he got to his hands and knees, stood and limped toward the empty gunpowder wagon. “It’s dangerous as hell, but we’ll have to

use the wagon and roll down the pass. We'll never get through the zombie suicide squad otherwise."

"Zombie suicide squad?" I said with rather a bit of alarm.

"A mop-up crew of bomb shamblers to go in after the cliff charges went off. They had orders to run into groups of humans lighting fuses to the powder kegs strapped to their backs when they got close."

"Why didn't you say this before?" I said, my alarm rising toward panic.

"I told you! I didn't think I'd get this far!" Russell shouted back. "I didn't know what contingency plans Vulzhugar had in place against our escape. I was hoping the shamblers didn't have any standing orders once we got this far." He said to the frit, "Don't bother to turn the wagon around, the dragging tongue might keep the wagon from twisting too much and slow us down a bit. Maybe not. But we can't steer it and we can't wait any longer. Here they come."

Perhaps a score of shamblers had emerged from hiding places down the pass and were moving at an easy lope toward us. The powder kegs strapped to their backs had fuses inserted in their tops and dangling over each shambler's shoulder. They each only had to touch the slow fuses they were carrying in one hand to light them.

The drawbridge on our right was coming down again. I was placed in the wagon along with the packs and loot bag, then Russell and R'khs'greech pushed the wagon out into the pass and aimed it down the center. As it started to slowly roll, they clambered aboard. The wagon accelerated toward the advancing bomb shamblers.

"Last bomb," shouted Russell. "Make a hole for us ahead. Make it count."

The frit's aim was uncanny. He dropped the last bomb between two of the bomb shamblers, shattering their limbs and knocking them aside.

“Ha-ha!” shouted Russell. “Natural 20! Good shot, R’khs’greech!”

The barrels on the backs of the shattered shamblers came free of their harnesses and rolled away, one going over into the chasm and one fetching up against the opposite side of the pass as the wagon passed through the scattered shamblers. I heard an explosion from within the chasm; the other barrel did not detonate. The shamblers still on their feet turned to pursue.

“We’re not going fast enough!” shrilled R’khs’greech. “They will catch us!”

Russell stared at the lead shambler closing even as the wagon rolled faster. He stripped off his shirt with then grabbed a yellow can from a pocket on his backpack. Pressing on a nozzle at the top of the can, he sprayed its contents all over the sweat-soaked garment. The wagon jarred as the closest bomb shambler hurled himself on the tongue of the wagon and started clawing his way up to the bed of the wagon.

Russell grabbed the slow fuse from the wagon bed where R’khs’greech had dropped it after hurling the last bomb and touched the smoldering end to the shirt. For a moment, nothing happened. Then the shirt burst into yellow flame. Yelling as the shirt’s flames licked over his arm and shoulder, Russell slapped the burning cloth over the face and shoulders of the shambler just as its claws grabbed the edge of the wagon. The creature reached for the shirt with one claw as it hung on with the other and tore it off his face.

The fuse on its bomb had ignited.

Russell reached down, yanked the tire iron out of his backpack, shifted his grip on it and brought it down on the claw still holding the wagon, shattering the bones. The shambler dropped from the wagon and rolled, the following shamblers closing behind it.

“Get down!” yelled Russell as the wagon hit a rock, jarring everything in it into the air. Russell fell, grabbing the wagon where the shambler was just a few seconds ago.

The shambler’s bomb exploded with a tremendous blast. It was followed by more explosions as some of the bombs carried by the other shamblers detonated.

There were no more shamblers.

Russell fell back into the wagon bed screaming. “My face! My face!” He held his burned hand over the bloody furrow torn across his forehead, his right eye and cheek by a flying nail that was now embedded just below his right shoulder. The nail must have struck him while he lying across the back of the wagon.

R’khs’greech shouted in alarm at the sight of Russell’s blood but rallied quickly. “We are almost there, D.B.! I see the banners of the army ahead!”

Either the explosions had damaged a wheel or we were hitting more bumps; the wagon was jarring constantly, making it hard for Russell and R’khs’greech to stay up.

We passed under the red rock. Would the shamblers light the fuse trains? Their instructions were very specific—but shamblers are not at all smart.

The wagon careened toward the leading ranks, footmen wearing leather jerkins and greaves with small iron plates sewn into them for additional protection. They were armed with short swords and carried shields. Those in the path of the onrushing wagon wavered for a moment then dodged to either side.

Russell crawled to the other side of the wagon, leaving bloody handprints. He gripped the edge of the wagon with one hand and waved the other, shouting, “Stop! Turn back! The pass is a trap! Retreat! Run away!”

He continued to shout, blood on his face, shoulder and hands as the wagon barreled through the following units, whose ranks parted to avoid it. He scattered some archers whose bows were strung but were still slung over their

shoulders; by the time they drew arrows the wagon was well behind them.

The wagon was edging toward the south side of the pass, the rocky slope getting closer. Ahead, we saw a group of armored and mounted knights carrying the banner of the Lucent God; Harol-Dárim's personal banner flew below it. It was clearly his personal retinue, and the pale, dark-haired man of striking mien holding the gold-tinted helmet in one arm was Harol-Dárim himself. Not far from him stood several priests of Hælos, wearing long white robes that seemed unstained by travel and polished brass or gold skullcaps as befitted their rank.

Behind Harol-Dárim's knights were a group of cloaked and hooded men wearing dark green and brown leather. They were carrying recurved bows in hand and short swords in scabbards slung across their chests. They surrounded perhaps a dozen bareheaded blond women wearing green robes or leather garb similar to the men. These, then, were the Wardens of the Highwald, and the women the Kyrai—the priestesses of Aldyth.

Some of the Wardens, reacting quickly, managed to loose arrows that missed or sank into the side of the wagon as it passed. One of the Kyrai raised a bow as well and shot. The arrow sped toward the tongue of the wagon still dragging behind, clearly a miss—

Her arrow's flight *curved in midair* in the blink of an eye—

The left wheels of the wagon reached the south side and rode up the slope of the pass wall, tipping the wagon on its side and spilling everyone and everything out. It spun, overturned and slid to a halt. Russell's blue nylon backpack and the loot bag tumbled but neither burst open. My construction is sturdy—I suffered only some dirt on my cover.

R'khs'greech rolled over and got on all fours. He looked around woozily, then emitted the most eerie scream I'd ever heard from him.

Russell lay next to him, chest down with his head turned to one side. His left shoe had become lost when the wagon rolled. His burned right arm was limp at his side and his left arm stretched past his head. His intact left eye stared lifelessly.

An arrow, which neatly pierced his spine and heart, stood from his back.

9. Recriminations

“No!” shrieked R’khs’greech. “Nonononono!” He wailed and shook Russell’s body as if to awaken it, then threw himself over it, sobbing.

Soldiers that had been running after the out-of-control wagon arrived and formed a ring around the frit with weapons drawn and bows leveled.

“Get away from him, you filthy frit,” growled one of them, a sergeant.

The frit stiffened; his sobs abruptly stilled. He rose to his feet, his fists clenching, his eyes aflame with rage.

“You fools,” he said, speaking to the ranks of soldiers surrounding him. “You *stupid* humans. We, who were Vulzhugar’s abject slaves, escaped to warn you that the pass was trapped, that you were marching into utter destruction. We did so in mortal peril. We took the only means to reach you before you triggered the trap, which would have rained hundreds of tons of stone down on you, followed by a rain of thunder and fire.”

His voice rose in quivering rage. “And our thanks—which neither of us asked for—is for you to *kill* the *only human* that ever show a frit a *bit* of decency and call *me* a ‘filthy frit’? How *dare* you!”

The sergeant, ignoring the tirade, turned to the nearest officer. “Sir, the Wardens scouted the mountains and reported no activity showing there were shamblers there ready to drop any stone, and certainly not that much. We did hear distant booming, but that could mean anything. I say we’re wasting

time here. Let's kill the frit and resume march. We have the archmage to root from his lair."

It was time to intervene. Focusing my remaining *wiir*, I snapped into the air and hovered above R'khs'greech, speaking in a booming voice to carry as far as I could. "I am the Grimoire of Arcadym Larmach, that famous adept of arcane arts of decades past. You know me, Harol-Dárim. You and my last master, Gharmile, adventured together when you were a young knight.

"This frit, named R'khs'greech, is our ally and under my protection. You harm him at risk of your life. Gharmile was captured and destroyed by Vulzhugar almost six years ago, and since then I have been a prisoner of the Pallid Mage, bound by his spells. R'khs'greech has been under Vulzhugar's control longer."

"Perhaps he still is," interjected an officer, a junior member of Harol-Dárim's retinue. "What's to say this is not a ruse of the archmage to distract us?"

"It could be if the archmage were a fool—and if he hadn't been blown to bits before your arrival."

"What, are you saying this mere frit destroyed the most powerful mage of our time?"

"No. But he aided the one who did; he risked his life along with the man who *did* destroy Vulzhugar."

"Ah. And where is this hero, this mighty warrior or wizard that bested Vulzhugar? We should honor such a man."

"He lies dead before you with an arrow in his back."

"What, the fat old man? He's certainly no warrior. Who is this mighty wizard? We should have his name so the bards may sing his praises."

"His name was Dillon Bertram Russell. So far as I know, he is not and never has been either a warrior or a wizard. He was taken from his own world by one of Vulzhugar's minions, a Faceless that brought Russell through the Tomb of Æshagon. For several months, he deceived Vulzhugar with a plan to

destroy this army then obliterated him along with the West Tower.”

“An unlikely story.”

“What is your name and who is your next of kin?”

“Are you threatening me?”

“If you doubt my word, you have only to take up one of the banners of the Lucent Church and ride up past the large red rock further up the pass. The shamblers hiding on the top of the pass walls will see the banner and light the fuse trains to detonate the blasting charges in the cliffs. Should you survive the resulting avalanche, you may come back and apologize to me. If not, your comrades in arms will have lost an officer of dubious value and learned an important lesson, and I can tell your next of kin where to locate your splattered remains for proper burial if they are so inclined.”

“If you were a man, I’d cut out your heart!”

“Speak carefully, sirrah. I was teaching great mages when your great grandfather was an infant soiling his diapers. You will cease this nonsense and show the respect I am due. If you cannot then you will be silent or I will conjure your tongue from your mouth. Be still!” The blushing officer, whether out of fear or simple tongue-tied outrage, said no more.

“Harol-Dárim, ask the Wardens to search the cliffs flanking the pass thoroughly for hidden shamblers. See the remains of the shamblers destroyed in the pass. Sift the ruins of the West Tower. Examine the contents of the blue backpack.”

“No one touches D.B.’s backpack!” snarled R’khs’greech. “It was his! No one is worthy!”

“Enough,” Harol-Dárim finally said, and silence fell. “I know the Grimoire of Arcadym Larmach and trust its word. The Wardens will search the pass for any shamblers that may be there. Once they are dealt with, we will proceed to the fortress.

“As for Master Russell, even if he did not destroy Vulzhugar, his and Master R’khs’greech’s escape from the archmage to warn us is a worthy deed of itself and so he shall be buried with the honors of a hero.”

“No,” said one of the women robed in green. She seemed the most mature of the twelve of them present, standing gracefully at ease where the others would occasionally fidget. She wore her ash blonde hair drawn back in a chignon, with full lips, an upturned nose and large, ice blue eyes framed by her oval face atop a long, graceful neck.

“You object, Eldest Daughter of Aldyth?” said Harol-Dárim.

That title could only address the Kyra-kol, the High Priestess of Aldyth. This, then, was Tárlyma, Ward of the Highwald.

Tárlyma nodded. “As you know, I have the gift of far-seeing, which has been clouded by Vulzhugar’s spells since before the army marched from Auchüss. These spells are fading now. While you and your men were...occupied, I have been able to see the pass and the fortress more clearly than I have in months.

“The ridges of the pass do seem to have but a few cunningly concealed shamblers on each side, watching one section of the pass most closely.

“The pass itself is littered with the remains of shamblers, some of them torn to bits. A few more destroyed shamblers are near the barbican.

“There are also the remains of shamblers just inside the fortress’s main entrance, which I have never been able to scry before. The inner regions of the fortress are still a blur.

“The West Tower is utterly destroyed.

“For myself, I cannot see how these two could have escaped with the Grimoire of Arcadym Larmach if Vulzhugar was around to prevent it. I conclude that he cannot, either because he is diminished or extirpated.

“If Vulzhugar is indeed gone, we owe a great deal to the man who avenged the slaughter of the Sons of Eishim and the Daughters of Aldyth.

“The Wardens will be told where the shamblers are on the cliff and root them out. Then you will be able to storm the fortress and eliminate the rest. I do not think that you will have any great difficulty in that task. The priests of the Lucent Church should provide your men with what magical protection and aid they need.

“As for the man, we claim his remains and effects and will take them with us. The frit may follow, stay or leave as he pleases. It is no concern of ours.”

“Why should I allow this?” Harol-Dárim asked.

“Why should you not?”

“Because I do not know your intentions.”

“Do you heed the lies spread in the north about us then, Champion? Those that call us heathens or heretics?”

Harol-Dárim’s reply was long in coming. “No,” he finally said. “Yet I still ask your intent.”

“It was through our error this man is dead. We shall attempt a Rite of Transference.”

“No!” shouted the gold-capped priest of Hælos. “Are you mad? A Rite of Transference? The last time this was tried over twenty years ago, the ritual failed and half the priests died!”

“The last time the Daughters of Aldyth tried it they were successful.”

“And when was that?”

“The Year of Twelve Elm.”

“I know of that. It was over a century ago, and more than a score of experienced priestesses performed it. You have twelve, half of them barely more than initiates!”

“Nevertheless, it shall be attempted.”

“Why?”

“I will keep my own council on that. Suffice it to say that I feel that we will all be sorry if we do not.”

“Do you prophesize?”

“I think not. But I feel it nonetheless.”

“Lunacy! Harol-Dárim, I appeal to you as Champion of the Lucent God: do not allow them to try this!”

Harol-Dárim gazed intently at Tárlyma for some time. She returned his gaze with aloof confidence. Finally, he spoke.

“It is not for me to impose my will on the Daughters of Aldyth. They may attempt the ritual or not as they wish but I ask that they pray for the guidance of their goddess to see if it is her will.”

“But—”

“You may be Bishop of Taschelle, Croneir, but I am war leader. This is my word. I will not interfere. And neither will you. Do you understand?”

Croneir was clearly not convinced but grudgingly acceded. “As you wish, Champion.”

“I am glad we agree. Denya Tárlyma, I judge the service of you and your sister priestesses to be concluded honorably. Take the Wardens you deem necessary for your needs and the rest when the fortress has been reduced. Go with my blessings and thanks.”

Tárlyma nodded in acknowledgement. “May Hæthyr grant you grace, ease your journey in life and receive you unto her bosom on your last day. Go forth in victory, Champion.”

She turned to the Warden commander, a somewhat short man with tied-back dark blonde hair and a graying beard and said, “Headmark Gwerdon, you have your orders. Send a messenger to the woods near the end of the pass each morning and evening to report to me unless otherwise informed.” Gwerdon nodded and gave an odd bowing-with-palm-over-heart salute.

I floated down to R’khs’greech, who had been all but forgotten. He looked about in confusion. “What is happening? What are they doing? Where are they taking D.B.?”

“Gather your things and Russell’s. We’re going with the priestesses.”

“Why?”

“Well, Tárlyma feels that it’s their fault that Russell is dead.”

“It is. So?”

“So they’re going to try to fix him.”

End of excerpt