

## Chapter 2

It is not at all going as planned.

Not, Lodal has to admit to himself, that they really had a plan going in. From what the captain had said, he had thought them capable of easily dealing with five or six goblins, maybe even go head to head with a dozen of the creatures if needs be. Yet there are only two of the vile creatures here and everything is going wrong.

The fog is slowly lifting, denying the goblins the benefit of its cover, but showing clearly for the first time the hideous creatures with their large bulbous eyes and pointy teeth. More importantly, it reveals their mounts: pale white lizards, larger than they ought to be, with long sticky tongues to draw in their prey and crushing jaws to break bones and rend flesh.

So far the brave vigil have only managed to take out one of the goblins, its lizard mount still locked in combat with Teppum and Dexonia, their forms no more than dark shadows in the last remnants of the mist, while a few feet away, Shadin and Lodal try to hold the other goblin astride its pet at bay, occasionally aided by one of Lymle's arrows, although, fearful of hitting her friends, she cannot get a good shot in at either enemy.

Lodal swings his greatsword in a wide arc, but the nimble lizard easily dodges the assault, keeping itself and its rider safe from harm. Nothing he does seems to have any effect on the creatures: his greatsword misses, his pole-weapon lies discarded a few feet away, also blatantly ineffective, and Lodal is beginning to wonder if he is cursed with some form of bad luck.

Reality quickly drags him back from his dark thoughts, but that second of distraction might have been enough to doom them all. In front of his eyes, Shadin suddenly leaps forward, his gleaming scimitar poised to strike at the lizard that's temporarily unbalanced by jumping away from Lodal's attack, but the small sha has forgotten about the goblin rider and is completely open to its attack. The lizard's tongue strikes, wrapping around Shadin's arm and pulling him ever closer towards the blade that will sever his head.

Lodal's eyes track the complete arc of the rusty shortsword up to the point where it will invariably connect with the sha's neck. It is as if time has slowed down, but he cannot will his body to do anything to stop it.

Lym's fearful cry breaks time's hold and suddenly, impossibly, Shadin stumbles, ducking underneath the mad swing and only getting hit by the flat of the blade. He goes down, unconscious or wounded Lodal doesn't know.

His patience, which is generally not his strong point, snaps. He is only vaguely aware of Lym rushing past him and kneeling next to her brother, fervently muttering the words that will summon her healing magic, is barely conscious of Teppum and Dex driving their adversary to the ground and deaf to the loud clanking noise as his greatsword drops from his hands and he launches himself towards the creatures that nearly caused the death of one of his teammates.

He is weaponless but certainly not defenseless. As the red haze takes over he is aware only of his claws, his sharp teeth and the forms of his enemies. It seems to last an eternity, although experience tells him it takes no more than a few seconds.

Then voices pierce the fog in his mind.

"Lodal?" That'll be Lym, scared as always when he loses control like that, although he doesn't understand why. He's never once endangered his companions when it happens.

"He is gone from us." Dex' dreamy voice floats by. "Best leave him be for now."

But he hears them and the haze passes. The mangled bodies of the goblin and its aberrant mount are at his feet. In the distance he can see Teppum scouting the area for more threats, while the others are gathered around Shadin who is sitting up, although his eyes don't seem to be able to focus, giving him a cross-eyed gaze. The egg sized bump on his head is clearly visible through his fur.

"Well that could have gone better," the rat-sha mutters groggily.

With the last slivers of fog evaporating they can finally take in their surroundings. The plateau they are standing on is a least forty feet long and just as wide, the large bonfire the goblins have created still burning and the busts of the statues rising past the edge of the platform like soldiers standing guard. The entrance they may have once been guarding is long gone, as little more than crumbled walls and a single archway remain of the fort that must once have been quite grand.

"Impressive, aren't they?" Teppum asks, seeing most of their gazes resting on the statues.

"What are they?" Lymle asks, gently touching Lodal's shoulder and healing some of the scrapes he doesn't remember receiving.

"It is said," Teppum says quietly, almost reverently, "that the elementals once stood guard over this fort. When the humans, elves and other races came across this place, they took up places next to the immortal elementals and aided them in their Vigil. Eventually the elementals departed and left their task to the mortals. That is when Vigilton was created and the vigil charged with keeping this place safe."

"What were they guarding?"

Teppum shrugs. "No one remembers." He shakes his backpack from his shoulders and says cheerfully to his weary charges: "Let's set up camp here before we search the area for stragglers."

"We have to go in there to investigate. Who knows how many more goblins got in there."

"We do not know if the goblins even got in there. It may have been an earthquake or other natural disturbance that created that hole."

"We won't know that for certain until we check it out."

"No," Teppum says emphatically. "The Vigil is holy ground. We do not have the right to enter it."

"But it is our duty to protect it." Lymle agrees with her twin as usual.

He might have expected this from the two impulsive sha. He could even understand Lodal's loyalty in backing them up, but he had not imagined Dexonia to agree as well. So far the quiet half-orc has seemingly only done enough of her duties for Vigilton to feed herself and keep a roof over her head, but here she is practically rearing to search the opened trapdoor they have found leading into the ruins. That, more than anything, gives Teppum reason to pause and think, but the four determined faces in front of him obviously won't take no for an answer.

He knows when he has been defeated.

"Go," he grumbles, although a part of him is curious about the inside of the mysterious ruin he has protected for so long. He blames his human ancestor for that trait. "It's not like I can stop you. But don't expect me to go in there with you." His loyalty and sense of duty prevent him from overstepping his bounds that far.

Barely before the last word leaves his lips, his charges are stepping through the hole in the ground onto the stairs that lead into the ruins. Inside they are greeted by darkness, until Lymle lights a torch. Its flickering light illuminates walls carved with intricate scenes of animals and landscapes, the reliefs broken here and there where time and water have worn the stone away.

The stairs lead roughly thirty feet down and they make it there unimpeded, except for a pair of flagstones falling away before their feet into a rough hole, probably made by some burrowing creature long ago. On the other side of the obstacle a large room beckons them, cast in an eerie blue glow.

A hop, a skip and a jump later and they discover that the blue light is shining from an antechamber where a miniature blue whirlwind is spinning soundlessly. Faintly flowing runes line the archway that leads to the antechamber and they come to a halt before it, the lazily swirling vortex drawing their eyes and all thoughts of the goblins they were supposed to be looking for forgotten.

"What do they do?" Lodal asks Dex in particular, as she is most learned of those things.

The half-orc runs her hand over the runes, not quite touching them. "I cannot be sure," she says, "but I would imagine they were meant to ward against something."

"What would happen if we stepped through it?" Shadin asks.

"I do not know."

The rat-sha scratches his chin as if contemplating trying it out and Lymle quickly says: "Before throwing yourself in, let's try tossing something through the arch." She starts looking around for a pebble or something else easily thrown.

"You can use this," Lodal rumbles, holding out a branch he found, large enough to be used as a small club or a walking stick.

Lymle takes the piece of wood and pulls her arm back to throw, regarded by the two men. Dex, who seems to have lost interest again, drifts across the room, looking at the murals.

"If you throw it, you might as well toss it into that vortex," Shadin mutters.

For one second a terrible feeling creeps up on Lymle, like they shouldn't be there and should leave while they still can, but then she shrugs. Curiosity killed the cat-sha, after all.

The branch leaves her hand and passes the archway unimpeded. Lymle is about to proclaim it safe to walk through when the vortex swallows up the piece of wood. Instead of swirling around in the strangely glowing winds, the branch remains quite still, hanging suspended in the air in the eye of the storm.

Then it begins to grow.

It elongates until it is as large as Lymle and Shadin, as large as Lodal, as large as the statues outside. Branches shoot out from it, like the gnarled limbs of a tree, but it is unlike any tree they've seen before. Its bark is twisted and chipped, obsidian and basalt colored, its stature stooped as if bent down by a strong wind. Suddenly, the vortex around the once tiny branch explodes, buffeting them with wind and an anguished wail as the feet-like roots of the newly grown tree touch the ground.

Then it speaks.

"You have freed me." Its voice sounds like thunder rolling across the hills and all of them feel their hair stand on end from the power it radiates. The tree bends down, leaning on a hand whose fingers are gnarled and crooked like twigs. Its eyes, black holes of infinite darkness, take in the tiny forms in front of it, before it stand up, the withered leaves on its head rustling against the ceiling.

"You have fed me and now I am free. You must be the slaves of the elementals. Tell me: who ordered my release?" It stretches its long arms, flexing the slender fingers. "Ah, but it is good to be free again."

From the corner of her eye, Lymle can see Lodal and Dex cautiously making their way back to the stairs, but her own body seems unable to move. Shadin, next to her, seems to suffer the same fate and Lym reaches out for the comforting touch of her brother's hand.

"I asked you a question, slave," the dark tree creature bellows and Lymle closes her eyes so she does not have to look at the crooked face looking down at them. She wonders if it can sense their fear.

After a pause in which neither sha know what to answer, it says: "It matters not. More important to me is knowing if they went through with their plan. Is that filthy goddess still here?"

Goddess? Shadin and Lymle look at each other, thinking the same thing. Does he mean Iyassia? The goddess of the tree that gives life to the world?

"N... no," Lymle stutters, the words stumbling over her tongue. "There are no gods or goddesses here."

The creature leans down again, its pure black eyes no more than slits in the bark-covered face.

"Liar," it whispers and Lymle nearly stops breathing. "Liar!"

The force of the word knocks the two sha down.

"So they have made a pact with that filthy, despicable creature," the towering tree rages, each sentence shaking the earth beneath them, showering them with dust from the ceiling. "Fine. I will destroy her and all that stand against me. I will suck this world dry of magic and when I am strong again I will tear down the heavens and slay these so called gods! And you..." The enormous creature pauses, contemplating their fate. "... Well, you have released me. I suppose in return, I will leave you for last."

It laughs and the twins can feel the ground underneath them crack and churn. Then, without warning, it disappears. Stunned, Lymle looks up at the place where the malicious creature just stood.

In a small, trembling voice, Shadin asks her: "What happens in the ancient ruin, stays in the ancient ruin, right?"