

The Test of Manhood

An Excerpt from “The Assassin’s Trail”

The Adventures of Wrathgar

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I

In the northern reaches of Korovia is the mountain range known as the Snowfells. The range is mostly short peaks, but the terrain is harsh and there are no towns. The nomadic tribes who live in the region are mostly human, but also some wood elf and wild elf tribes. To the east, across verdant forests and fertile plains, lay the Ice City of Azek, and to the south, across wide plains and rich farmland, is Oraknev, the capital city of Korovia.

One of the human tribes of the Snowfells is the Baarstammderstark, who trace their long history back to the neighbouring kingdom of Loqland. The Baarstammderstark believe in being self-sufficient and believe their warriors, both men and women, must pass tests of adulthood. For the boys this means that in the Autumn of their twelfth year all the boys of that age are given some weapons and told to leave. If they come back successfully then they are considered men.

For Wrathgar it was no different. In the fall of Wrathgar's twelfth year he and three other boys were given a hard-pulling composite longbow made from deer antlers and tamarack wood, a quiver of copper tipped arrows, and a two-handed greatsword. The greatsword, considered a holy weapon, is known amongst the Baarstammderstark as a Grossecklinge and the four boys were given three lessons in Grossecklingenspiel, so that they knew the fundamentals of swordplay.

High Shaman Korflex, an aged man who wore hawk feathers in his long grey hair, held a brief ceremony in the High Shaman's longhouse during which he smeared deer fat across the faces of the four boys and spat in each of their eyes, repeating the phrase "You are not yet worthy to serve Metrequia!" to each boy. The people of the

Baarstammderstark worshipped the goddess of the silver moon, often asking for her blessing so that they could hunt by the moonlight. They also paid homage to the son of the goddess, Belnark, known as the humble warrior.

The four boys were forcibly tossed from the High Shaman's longhouse and then they were driven out of the village of longhouses by young men and women throwing stones at them and shouting insults. The four boys, having witnessed this event every year, knew they could not return until they had each killed something stronger than a man and carried it back to the village. Only then would they be worthy of Metrequia's blessing.

For girls about to become young women the ceremony was very different. After having their first blood they were banished from the village and not allowed to return until after the next full moon, which might be mere days away or almost a month away. Regardless of the time they were given, the young women were given the task of surviving on their own and finding a rare red flower that grew in a sacred grotto which could only be reached by weaving a long rope and climbing down into the grotto. When they returned with the flower after the full moon they were considered to be women at last, having 'flowered'.

Outside of the village the four boys glanced at each other. Wrathgar saw a mixture of expressions, some sour and some excited to be out on their own. Each boy had hunted before, but always in the company of an elder and never too far from the village. Wrathgar's father, Wulfric, had hunted predominantly and Wrathgar had gone hunting numerous times with his father. Last year his father had left on a long journey and had never returned, and since then the young barbarian had only hunted when in the company of High Shaman Korflex or with other hunters from the village

who didn't mind his company. The boy wasn't anxious to hunt alone.

Wrathgar had only just had his twelfth name day less than a month ago. He was not the smallest of the boys, but he was the youngest. Wrathgar was tall and strong for his age, a handsome boy with a mop of black hair and the very beginnings of a beard.

In contrast Muddenklaw was the oldest of the four and his beard thicker and blacker. He was also larger in height and in stomach than the rest of the boys. He turned to face the other boys and spoke loudly: "We should stick together. Between the four of us we can hunt down all the animals we need until we find a bear or deer each that we can drag back to the village."

"And why should we help you?" sneered Kleinver, the smallest of the four, but easily the smartest hunter amongst them. Even at a young age he was known for his trapping skill and could trap creatures both large and small. Kleinver had an important point. Muddenklaw was more known for his ability to eat than his ability to hunt. He was too impatient and had a tendency to step on sticks and spook the prey. He would be a liability, not an asset, in any hunting party.

As if making his point Kleinver stomped off on his own, heading down a hunting trail to the west that he knew well.

Steinpfeil, the next oldest boy, nodded his head. "I'll stick with you." Steinpfeil was Muddenklaw's best friend and he constantly followed the larger boy wherever he went. Wrathgar wondered who would be leading the hunt, Steinpfeil or Muddenklaw, knowing that Steinpfeil was certainly the better shot with a bow.

"May Metrequia bring you good fortune," Wrathgar stated flatly. He nodded briefly to Steinpfeil and waved to

Kleinver who was looking back at them from the western trail. Wrathgar deliberately avoided Muddenklaw's gaze as he turned his back on them and headed east, following an old hunting trail that was rarely used any more because it went too close to lizardfolk territory.

When he was out of sight the boy picked up his pace, jogging down the trail, jumping over rocks and fallen trees and putting some distance between himself and the others. He continued at a strong pace until he came to a fork in the path and chose the less worn path.

If he had followed the more worn path it would have taken him to an abandoned copper mine which his people still used for making arrowheads, spearheads, tools and jewelry.

Away from any signs of civilization Wrathgar's first task was the dreadful copper-tipped arrows he had been given. They were somewhat blunt and meant for killing rabbits and small game. He would need something much sharper if he was to hunt down a deer or a bear, and heavier arrowheads would hit harder. He drew his Grosse Klinge and briefly admired the handiwork of the steel blade. Then he set upon the woods looking for straight branches and tree limbs that would make spears, javelins or arrows. He knew where there was an outcropping of flintstone east of here and he could flintknap himself some flint arrowheads by nightfall. Although not malleable like copper is, the flint arrowheads would be larger, heavier and razor sharp.

He left the hunting trail and worked his way uphill, keeping an eye out for any game and pausing to inspect each tree for branches the right size and straightness.

It was while he was foraging that he heard the screech-cry of a giant owl. It sent shivers down his spine and he glanced up just in time to see the great bird the size of a horse with its massive wingspan fly by. He noticed the

rider too, an ebony-haired and dark skinned wood elf who waved down at him. The owl and rider were heading for the clearing at the top of the hill.

The young barbarian ran uphill, trying to keep pace with the giant bird in hopes of actually reaching the clearing first. He lost, but not by far. The owl circled the clearing and landed only a few seconds before Wrathgar reached the sparse scrub grass that covered the area at the top of the rocky hill.

The giant owl screeched loudly and clawed the rocks in front of it as the rider dismounted.

"Metrequia keep you Wrathgar," the rider said, her voice soft and musical. She patted her owl's neck affectionately to get it to calm down. Giant owls were notoriously protective of their owners. The beasts were exceptionally smart too, but rarely spoke except to their master and usually only in the elven tongue, which Wrathgar was still learning.

"And Metrequia keep you too, dear Vertia," Wrathgar responded, staring at the elf's supple and graceful movements. He felt like a clumsy bear cub next to her. Vertia was a wood elf huntress and her skill with the bow was remarkable even amongst her own people. Her dark skin was tanned and free of scars, her face fair and beautiful, and her emerald green eyes had an ethereal quality to them.

"I hear you are on your first solo hunt. I have something for you-" She started to pull a quiver of fine elven arrows from her back.

Wrathgar held up his hand. "I don't think we're supposed to accept help in the form of weapons. Sorry, but I cannot accept."

Vertia's face was downcast for an instant, but then brightened. "Can you accept help in the form of information?"

"Metrequia doesn't frown upon the truth, so helpful information is always appreciated."

Her face brightened more so and she shouldered the quiver of precious arrows. "Very well then. Since you are traveling east I need to warn you of the lizardfolk that live in the swamps and caves east of here, near the base of the mountain. They forage into the woods from time to time. They have faces like a chameleon and their skin changes colour slowly so that they can blend into backgrounds. They're not exceptionally hostile and prefer to stay hidden, but it would still be best to stay clear of them. They welcome few outsiders and sometimes take slaves."

"Metrequia teaches it is good to know your enemies and your allies," Wrathgar mused, quoting High Shaman Korflex. "Thank you Vertia. I'd ask you to come with me, but as you know it is against the rules of the first hunt."

Vertia smiled. "Are you sure I can't convince you to accept the arrows?"

"I am sure."

An hour later Wrathgar was chipping away at flintstone with a flat rock and wishing he had accepted the precious gift. It would have saved him time and trouble, and prevented some bruises on his hands as he worked away at the difficult task. "What doesn't kill me only makes me stronger," he murmured to himself, a favourite saying amongst the Baarstammderstark.

It was difficult work chipping away at the stone and binding together the arrows. Before he realized it the sun had set in the west and he had made but a handful of new arrows. He would have to make camp here near the outcropping of stone. He had foraged some berries earlier so

he wasn't hungry, but he didn't feel very comfortable sleeping out in the open like this. It was his first time sleeping in the wilderness alone.

He went down the hill a small distance, found a tree where he could lean up against it comfortably and settled under his cloak with his back to the tree. It was dry and out of sight, so that much was comforting. Using his bow as a bow drill he started some tinder on fire and made a small campfire surrounded by stones to ward off the cold. It was difficult to fall asleep however, his mind was on edge due to his surroundings. Eventually he drifted off.

The next morning Wrathgar awoke and was glad to be alive. The fire had gone out during the night and he was chilled. He went back up the hill to the outcropping of rocks.

It took him but an instant to realize that while he had slept all of his flint arrows had disappeared. Gone. Taken from where he had hidden them under a slab of rock.

He looked frantically around the outcropping of flintstone, looking for his handiwork, and found something he wasn't looking for: The muddy footprints of two different people. One large footed, the other was closer to Wrathgar's foot size. There was no doubt in the young barbarian's mind that it must have been Muddenklaw and Steinpfeil who had snuck into the quarry and stolen his arrows from their hiding place.

Wrathgar clenched his fists and swore to Metrequia that Muddenklaw would pay for his treachery and that Steinpfeil would pay for following along. There was no rule saying one could not steal from others during the first hunt, but it was certainly not good sportsmanship either. After his anger subsided he paused to consider what to do next. He could try tracking Muddenklaw and Steinpfeil, or he could make more arrows, for he would need them eventually.

He decided to make more arrows. It wasn't worth it tracking down Muddenklaw over a matter of five arrows, despite all the effort it had taken him to make them.

Around midday Metrequia smiled on him and a pheasant landed near the outcropping of flintstone. Wrathgar promptly beamed it with a sharp rock and cooked it over a small fire.

By nightfall he had finished making forty-four fresh arrows, using the pheasant feathers for fletching. Not all of them were particularly well made, but they would suffice for his purposes. This time he circled the area to see if he was being watched and then hid the finished arrows at the base of the tree before lighting a new campfire and settling down to sleep. This time sleep came more easily. He awoke every time the fire began to die down and added more wood to keep it going.

Wrathgar awoke with a start to the howl of a wolf. It was to the north, and likely far off, but it had seemed quite loud to him as he was jolted from his sleep. Louder than any wolf howl he had ever heard before. He decided to break camp and leave. If he was lucky perhaps he could spot the wolf from a distance and take it down with one or two arrows, thus completing his first solo hunt.

He trekked northward spotting deer droppings along the way. They could be days old and didn't smell fresh, so he decided to stay on his original goal of hunting the wolf.

An hour later he came to a sandy clearing with scrub grass and a few boulders. There was a fire pit that was still smoking and the footprints of two people, likely Muddenklaw and Steinpeil, both of which had also trekked northward. It looked like they had broken camp only a short while ago because the fire pit still had a few glowing embers. Wrathgar reckoned he was directly behind them. He

hurried his pace along the trail heading north in hopes of catching up and tracking the wolf first.

But it was too late, he knew it was so when he saw the fresh wolf tracks and the tracks of the two boys following it.

A few minutes later he heard the twang of arrow shots up ahead and Muddenklaw whooping with glee mixed with the dying yelp of a canine.

Wrathgar slowed to a walk and crept silently through the woods off to one side, wanting to get a good angle where he could view the two without them spotting him.

"Now I can go home!" Muddenklaw declared, grabbing the dead grey wolf by the scruff of the neck. "You're going to make me a coat for the winter!" he boasted to the dead wolf.

"Um, what about me?" asked Steinpfeil quietly. He shuffled his feet.

"You?!" snorted Muddenklaw. "You can go shoot a deer and drag it back by yourself. This is my wolf!"

"But I'm the one that shot it!" declared Steinpfeil, gripping the arrow still stuck in the wolf's side in his fist. "Your arrow missed. I shot it in the lungs. By right this is my kill, not yours!"

"So what?! It's mine and I already declared it. It was my idea to track it. I would have killed it anyway if you hadn't got in my way!"

"I wasn't in your way! You tripped and missed completely! Why should I have to go shoot a deer? I've only got one flint arrow left! You have two!"

"So go make more!" shouted Muddenklaw, pushing Steinpfeil away from the wolf's corpse.

It was too much for Steinpfeil to take. He punched Muddenklaw in the side of the jaw, causing the larger boy's head to whip around to the side.

Muddenklaw turned back to face Steinpfeil, his face turning a dark crimson colour as blood rushed to his head. He leapt on the smaller boy and started pounding him with both fists. Steinpfeil lost his balance and fell under Muddenklaw's weight, the two boys tumbled down the side of the hill and came to rest against the side of a tree. Steinpfeil fought back as best as he could, but Muddenklaw used his weight to bury the smaller boy beneath him and hold him down while he pummelled him with his meaty fists.

Steinpfeil was unconscious and bleeding from his nose, eye sockets and ears when Muddenklaw's rage finally subsided. The larger boy stood, kicked him for good measure and then trudged back up the hill to where he had left the dead wolf.

The grey wolf was gone. There wasn't even a trail of blood to follow. It was just gone.

"Metrequia's cunt!" swore Muddenklaw. He looked back down the hill to where the smaller boy still lay. Someone had taken his wolf... He had an idea of who might have taken it. He stomped off into the woods, looking for signs of whomever had taken the wolf.

II

When Steinpfeil awoke he was beside a warm fire and his face was covered in dried patches of mud and blood. He looked up in disbelief, thinking Muddenklaw would never be so nice as to beat him up and then actually drag his body to a warm fire and patch up his wounds with mud poultices. He was disappointed and surprised when he saw Wrathgar sitting across the fire from him, but he was grateful and bewildered nevertheless.

"Thanks Wrathgar..." he murmured. "I'm sorry we stole your arrows. Muddenklaw said-"

Wrathgar held up a hand. "Shut up okay. Just tell me one thing: Why do you follow that idiot around all the time?"

Steinpfeil's face turned red, but not in anger. "The older boys beat me up sometimes. Muddenklaw stops them."

"And yet he also beats you up. Neither Metrequia or Belnark would ever approve of that. You have to learn to stand on your own two feet and fight your own fights."

"But they're bigger than I am!"

"And so is Muddenklaw. You still punched him damn hard, I saw it."

"You saw?"

"I saw," said Wrathgar and then patted the dead grey wolf's corpse beside him. "This is yours by right. You can carry it home tomorrow. But I am keeping my arrows, they are still mine by right."

Steinpfeil gushed out a thank you and started chattering about how Muddenklaw will have to find his own prize now. Meanwhile Wrathgar was deciding what to do about Muddenklaw. He didn't think the bigger boy had gotten what he deserved yet.

They ate roasted rabbit and slept by the fire, taking turns sleeping and keeping watch. Whoever was on watch tended the fire so it did not go out. The next day Wrathgar bid Steinpfeil farewell.

He trekked farther east, knowingly heading into territory where the lizardfolk hunted. He had last seen Muddenklaw headed in this direction and the large boy left a trail that a blind fool could follow. Everywhere along the path were broken branches, sword cuts on trees, deep footprints in the soft earth. Muddenklaw had vented a lot of rage as he had walked, leaving a trail of fallen tree limbs he had chopped through the foliage at head level with his Grosse Klinge.

It was a blatant disregard for traditional hunting practices and a warrior's respect for his weapon, from Wrathgar's perspective. He wouldn't be surprised if Muddenklaw's sword was bent and battered by now and half the game in these woods scared off.

The young barbarian followed silently and swiftly, running across flat stones for fear of stepping on a twig like his father had taught him. He kept his bow ready and a flint arrow nocked.

He passed by Muddenklaw's camp from the night before without even bothering to check the campfire. There was no smoke left in the air and it had long ago gone out.

Muddenklaw must have been moving swiftly too, for it was hours and miles away before he found the large boy's next campsite and the remains of a half eaten rabbit. Refusing to eat Muddenklaw's leftovers, Wrathgar backtracked and found a den of rabbits where he waited around for one to return and shot it with a copper-tipped arrow. He tucked the rabbit into his belt and sped off on Muddenklaw's trail.

An hour later he found large clawed footprints joining Muddenklaw's trail. Three taloned toes on the front and one toe at the back, like a large lizard, but deep in the earth as if it was carrying a lot of weight. The lizardfolk were now hunting Muddenklaw too, but not for revenge.

Wrathgar quickened his pace until he was flat out running through the woods.

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Muddenklaw didn't hear the lizardfolk coming up behind him. He was making too much racket of his own, swearing to himself about getting revenge against Wrathgar and maybe even Steinpfeil. That boy was going to get beat up again the next time he saw him. Muddenklaw was going to beat him black and blue. But Wrathgar, oh Wrathgar was going to get the worst of it. He wasn't going to use his fists on Wrathgar. No, Wrathgar was going to get the sharp end of his sword, and it wasn't going to be a quick death either. He was going to chop him to pieces, slowly.

Thus was Muddenklaw's state of mind and speech when he took a javelin in the back. He swore and bellowed loudly, drawing his sword. He cursed his luck when he saw the lizardfolk closing in on him, their mottled green skins blending in with the foliage, their tongues lashing out between sharp teeth. One of the lizardfolk tossed a woven net over him and Muddenklaw thrashed against the net with

his Grosseklunge, severing several of the vines holding it together, but became thoroughly entangled in the process.

The lizardfolk surrounded him and pummeled him with the butt ends of their long spears, keeping their distance from the flailing boy with the huge sword. Muddenklaw tried to fight back, his rage boiling over and his face turning red with blood and anger, but it was no use. The lizardfolk continued battering him with their long spears until he collapsed defeated to the ground and dropped his Grosseklunge.

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Wrathgar found the pool of blood, still sticky on the ground within the signs of a scuffle. There were shredded pieces of a vine net and plenty of footprints of both human and lizardfolk. There wasn't enough blood for Muddenklaw to be dead however and the shredded net definitely suggested they had taken the large boy alive.

There was a strange lizard skull shaped marking written on a tree nearby with some sort of reddish clay paste. It wasn't blood or any kind of paint Wrathgar had ever seen. He could only presume it meant "Stay Away!" or "Death!" and was meant to mark the territory of the lizardfolk.

He followed the lizardfolk's path downhill into the valley. The land was becoming more muddy in this direction and there was water springing from hot geysers on

the side of the hill. There was also the distinct smell of sulphur in the air, an ingredient High Shaman Korflex sometimes used in rituals. As he traveled he noticed several other trees marked with the same lizard skull symbol as he went deeper into their territory.

He also noticed wolf tracks too, but this wolf was far larger than any other beast he had ever seen. The footprints were about the size of a sabre tooth tiger's prints.

He stayed on the lizardfolk's trail. He had to find out what had become of Muddenklaw, but he was now moving cautiously and stealthily.

* * *

Muddenklaw awoke with a groan. He smelled something awful and it took him a while to realize it was himself. He was dripping with lizardfolk urine. His arms and legs were bound and his eyes were so swollen he could only squint out of them. It took him a moment to adjust to the low light.

There was a small and very skinny wood elf girl with lavender eyes crying in the cage that was next to his. Her hands were bound and her hair had been trimmed crudely with a dull knife. She looked to be about eight or ten winters old, but it was impossible for him to tell the precise age with elves. She was clutching her right leg which was twisted in a strange angle and looked like it might be broken. She didn't look at him and when she wasn't crying, which wasn't

that often, she kept her eyes firmly on the lizardfolk that walked by.

The lizardfolk camp was surprisingly well organized from Muddenklaw's perspective. There were stone walls and statues in the corners of the walls of lizardfolk carrying shields and spears. It wasn't a huge camp and only a handful of the stone buildings had thatched roofs. Hot water bubbled up from a geyser near the centre of the camp and there was warm steam mingled with the smoke in the air. Smoke rose from several campfires spread around, upon which nothing cooked and they seemed to be more ceremonial than anything else. The ground was muddy everywhere and there was a pool of stagnant water surrounding the geyser. Muddenklaw and the elf girl were inside wooden cages off to one side of the camp.

The lizardfolk walked around casually, their hatchlings and children running about carrying small spears, playing with each other in a game of stealth whereby they used their subtle colour changes to try and sneak up on their fellows. Meanwhile adults in loincloths and wearing wolf or bear skins went about their business, all carrying weapons. Spears and nets seemed to be their main weapons of choice. Muddenklaw had always been told that the tribe of lizardfolk kept hidden and kept to themselves, but these ones looked to be armed to the teeth and training for war.

Two of the lizardfolk were arguing loudly over the Grosse Klinge, which stood tip down in some thick mud, buried a foot deep. Muddenklaw presumed they were arguing over ownership. Oh what he would give to get his hands on that sword and cut through the necks of these stinking lizards...

A human woman set a bowl of muddy water in front of him and then backed away from his cage. Her eyes were downcast and her feet were bound with crude iron shackles.

She was incredibly thin and suffering from starvation. It took a moment for realization to sink in to Muddenklaw. He was now a slave. They would starve him half to death, beat him into submission, and he would eventually die of starvation or from the beatings. He would have to escape somehow or die slowly in captivity.

* * *

Wrathgar stayed in the shadows of twilight and prayed to Metrequia that lizardfolk can't see that well in the dark. He had managed to get quite close to the camp, but he was unsure of how to get over the walls and get a better view. He stood in the darkness mentally arguing options in his head before he realized he could just climb a tree and get a better look.

He chose a tree close to the wall and stayed on the outer side of the tree so that its branches would obscure his shape. He secured his Grosse Klinge to his back next to his longbow so it wouldn't make as much noise and climbed the tree until he was only a leap from the top of the wall.

He spotted the human slaves, and even a couple elf slaves almost immediately. Some were doing chores around the camp while others were in a line of wooden cages. It took him a while longer to locate Muddenklaw in the cage on the far side of the camp because there was a campfire with thick smoke obscuring that part of the camp.

Next came a moral dilemma. Should he leave Muddenklaw in slavery or risk his life against an entire tribe of lizardfolk trying to save someone he despised? Then there was the other matter: What about the other slaves? He didn't know them and with all likelihood they were from other neighbouring human and elf tribes. Should he condemn them to death just to spite Muddenklaw?

No, he would make a rescue attempt.

But he would be rescuing all of them, not just Muddenklaw.

He waited until it was dark and the only light came from the ceremonial fires spread around the camp. The lizardfolk appeared to worship some kind of fire deity he was unfamiliar with. Under the cloak of darkness he crept over the stone walls of the camp and made his way over to where two lizardfolk guards were standing near the entrance to the camp. He drew his Grosse Klinge off his back and waited for both guards to turn their backs.

Wrathgar leapt from the shadows and sliced the one guard across the back of the neck, nearly severing its head from its shoulders. The other guard turned in shock and Wrathgar hacked it down the middle before it could raise a sound.

He glanced around to see if anyone had noticed and then dragged the heavy bodies into the shadows. Knowing it would only be a matter of time before they were noticed missing he ran around the exterior of the nearest stone hut and headed towards a set of cages where four of the slaves were kept.

Praying for Metrequia's blessing he swung at the cage door and slashed it from its hinges. The slaves inside awoke with a start from the sound of snapping wood. He was certain other lizardfolk had heard the sound too, but he

didn't care anymore. All the excitement had worked him up into a blood frenzy.

He rushed to the next cage, slashed it crudely and then kicked it in.

"Wrathgar! Get me out of here!" shouted Muddenklaw, awake from the excitement and noise.

Wrathgar ignored him and went to the next cage, the one with the elf girl. He slashed the door open but then noticed the girl was limping and unable to walk properly.

Not stopping to think, he lifted the small girl onto his back and slashed open Muddenklaw's door and spun about in time to fend off the tip of a long spear aimed at his leg. He looked up and saw a lizardfolk snap its tongue at the young barbarian and raise its spear again for another thrust.

Muddenklaw barrelled out of the cage, his face red with rage. He brushed roughly past Wrathgar and grabbed the spear from the shocked lizardfolk. He spun the spear on it and drove the tip through its gut.

A javelin thudded into the cage next to Wrathgar and he charged at the offending lizardfolk who had thrown it, heedless of the elf girl clinging to his back. He sliced the unarmed lizardfolk down and stepped over its corpse, shouting something unintelligible about getting out of the camp, hoping the slaves would understand his words.

Muddenklaw tossed aside the long spear and ran for his sword, still stuck in the thick mud. The mud slowed him down but he managed to reach his Grosseklunge and draw it from the mud before any more of the lizardfolk reached him.

Wrathgar ran for the exit to the camp, stopping only briefly to chop at a lizardfolk guard swinging a rusty battleaxe. His bloodrage wouldn't last much longer, he realized dimly. He took a javelin in the shoulder as he ran, but kept running.

Muddenklaw chopped his way through two more lizardfolk before running after the young barbarian. He had two javelins stuck in his back by the time he caught up to Wrathgar and both young warriors were bleeding heavily.

They charged uphill away from the lizardfolk camp, the slaves leading the way. They cleared the top of the hill and Wrathgar paused to catch his breath.

It was then that Muddenklaw decided to take his revenge. He ripped the elf girl off Wrathgar's back and stabbed the young barbarian through the small of the back, the tip of his sword coming out through Wrathgar's stomach.

The young barbarian stumbled and fell, shocked. Too stunned to even scream in pain. He looked up at Muddenklaw, his face a mixture of confusion and hatred.

Muddenklaw spat at him and fled.

III

When Wrathgar awoke he couldn't move. He could feel earthworms and other creatures squirming around inside his bearskin hide and it was so dark he couldn't see. He immediately assumed he had been buried alive. He let out a panicked shout.

"Sssh!" came a soft voice with an elvish accent that reminded him immediately of Vertia. "There might still be lizards around. Be quiet!"

He wasn't dead and he wasn't buried either. Where was he? He decided to ask. "Where am I?" he whispered.

"You're inside an old log. Be quiet." Her voice was straight ahead of him, but he could not see the source.

That explained all the vermin crawling around beside him and inside his clothes. The sensation of insects crawling all over his skin was torment. He had no choice but to wait it out for now. His mind quickly turned to the last thing he remembered, Muddenklaw stabbing him in the back and seeing the sword tip sticking out of his stomach. How had he survived that? By all rights he should have bled to death.

As if sensing his thoughts the elvish voice spoke again. "Triquirius the Fire God saved your life today warrior, as you have saved mine from a life of slavery. The lizardfolk spared my life because I worship the same fire god, but they are firm believers in keeping slaves regardless of their faith. I was able to heal much of your injury thanks to his divine power, which was pretty serious. We can leave in a few minutes."

An elf cleric, very young evidently. Most likely just an acolyte. If the lizardfolk worshipped a fire god they would surely have recognized a fellow fire worshipper and spared her life. Or maybe they considered her god to still be a rival

to their own fire god, even though it was the technically same god? He did not know.

Wrathgar waited, trying to ignore the worms and critters crawling all over his skin.

"My leg is broken and Triquirius has not answered my prayers to heal it. Perhaps he sent you instead. Thank you."

She shifted and crawled out of the log, allowing light in so that Wrathgar could see again. It was morning by the looks of the bright light, perhaps even noon judging by the abundance of light beyond the entrance of the log. He groaned and pulled himself slowly out of the claustrophobic old log.

The girl was busy trying to brush off her muddy dress, which was ripped and torn in many places. She looked at her hands and realized they were likewise covered in filth. Her face turned into an expression of disgust and defeat. She looked up at the young barbarian with her lavender eyes with flecks of gold around the iris and looked like she might cry.

Wrathgar spat on his hands and washed them with spittle. It was better than nothing. "I'm Wrathgar. Who are you?" he asked. She saw his action and mimicked it, smiling a little at the unusual method.

"Florianna," she replied. "I hid your sword in a mud puddle over there," she said, pointing behind the log.

Good, thought Wrathgar. I know just who to use it on, he mused. But first I need to do something...

* * *

"Thank you dear Wrathgar," Vertia said, embracing Wrathgar shoulder to shoulder as comrades in her tribe did. "The wild elf tribe feared she was dead and eaten by some beast. They told us to keep an eye out for her, but they were relying only on hope. Every day the Phoenix tribe prayed to Triquirius the Thrice Reborn for her safe return. Florianna will once more see her family and her tribe again thanks to you, and sing your praises to the Fire God." She looked away from the young barbarian and at the surrounding encampment of wood elves who were celebrating, lifting the skinny elf girl above their heads and bringing her food. She paused and looked thoughtful for a long time, and then looked at Wrathgar's wounds. "I could find the high priestess and have her take a look at your wounds, but I know you would refuse help."

Wrathgar nodded solemnly. "She did a fine job of healing me. It is a divine miracle I am still alive. I must leave anyway. I have two beasts to track."

She nodded, but stared at him intently, her eyes searching his. "Will killing him really solve anything?"

"He dishonoured the first hunt with his treachery. Metrequia has no tolerance for such evil and neither do I. By Metrequia's will, Muddenklaw or I shall lie dead tonight." Wrathgar looked away from the elf and looked towards Florianna instead, unsure of his own words. He had killed several lizardfolk today. He wasn't so sure he could kill a human, even if it was someone as despicable as Muddenklaw.

"And the second beast?"

"A wolf of great size, possibly a worg or something else. A dire wolf maybe. The tracks were very big."

* * *

Muddenklaw paused to rest on a fallen tree. He had abandoned the human and elf slaves in the woods the night before, fleeing northward hoping to lose the lizardfolk tracking them. He was worried that if he had stayed with the others he would have been recaptured. His plan had worked for a while but somehow the lizardfolk had found his trail once more and now he had been running for hours. His strength was sapped and his will was beginning to falter. If the lizardfolk were still on his trail, he did not know, but every time he heard something in the woods he assumed it was them and kept running no matter how exhausted he was. Fear drove him to keep running.

He was hungry and tired, and for the first time he realized he was also lost. He had lost his bearings somehow and now the woods seemed alien and forlorn, the mountains taller and more forbidding as if no man had ever tread through these parts. It had been hours since he had seen a proper hunting trail.

He decided it was time he found some place to hide and sleep. He wandered through the forest for another hour before finally crawling into a briar patch. The thorns pierced his skin but it was better than nothing. At least here the lizardfolk could not see him and if they somehow tracked him here then he hoped they would make enough noises in the briar patch to wake him.

Muddenklaw had a fitful sleep, constantly waking to thorns in random parts of his body. He felt as if he was being punished by some unforeseen god who refused to let him sleep.

Hours later, rested, but still in need of some real sleep he grumbled and pulled himself out of the briar patch, swearing to himself that he would never sleep in such a place ever again.

There was a shout off to one side in a strange sibilant tongue and Muddenklaw realized his swearing had just alerted the lizardfolk to his presence. They were close by. He started to run but changed his mind. He turned about, drew his bow, nocked one of Wrathgar's flint arrows, looking for the lizardfolk in the dim light of the forest canopy.

A javelin flew past the barbarian, missing its mark.

Startled, Muddenklaw turned in the direction of the javelin's path and loosed his arrow wildly into the woods. It thudded into a tree, not even close to the lizardfolk who was well hidden and camouflaged against the foliage. He cursed when he realized he had just wasted his last flint arrow.

He heard more sibilant tongues in the woods, this time from a different direction. To Muddenklaw's ears it seemed as if they were laughing at him.

The barbarian boy dropped his bow and drew his battered Grosse Klinge. He took up a defensive posture, hoping to jump out of the way of any further javelins.

But no javelins came.

No net either.

Instead he heard a sharp twang of a bow and the tongues of two different lizardfolk fading in different directions.

"What just happened?" Muddenklaw wondered aloud, scarcely above a whisper. "Who's there?" he demanded after

a while, louder this time, holding his Grosseklunge up threateningly.

There was rustling in the woods off to one side, the sound of something coming closer, but there was no reply. Muddenklaw turned to face the new threat, holding his sword at ready and preparing to charge.

Wrathgar stepped into view from behind an ancient oak tree, his Grosseklunge drawn. His eyes were calm, but there was a determination in his face that unnerved the exhausted Muddenklaw.

Muddenklaw sputtered for a moment, his face turning red with rage. His mouth started to froth spittle as he spat out incoherent words of disbelief, hatred and disgust. He charged at Wrathgar, his feet flying across the ground as he jumped over fallen logs and bushes in his mad rush towards the younger barbarian.

Wrathgar waited, infinitely calm. He held his Grosseklunge up with one hand, his left hand, and then dropped the sword as if surrendering.

Muddenklaw roared with victory. His cry was a great shout that scared the birds and all manner of creatures into hiding.

Wrathgar quickly drew a crude but very long wooden spear from behind his back, took a step backwards and braced his foot. He levelled the spear towards Muddenklaw as the barbarian came charging uphill towards him.

Muddenklaw's cry became a gurgle and he swung at Wrathgar, his huge sword not even in range. He felt weak suddenly, as if a great weight was pressing down on his chest and it was difficult to breathe. He swung again at Wrathgar, trying to push forward despite the weight pushing back against his chest. He looked down to see what it was and for the first time noticed the spear lodged in his chest, just above his rotund belly.

Wrathgar pressed forward with the spear, holding the larger boy at bay. Blood was gushing around the crudely hacked off wooden spear point that was lodged deep inside Muddenklaw. Through clenched teeth the younger boy whispered the words: "I will not sully the sword of Metrequia with a traitor's blood. You will die today Muddenklaw, not for lack of strength, but for lack of common decency. Metrequia shall punish you for your misdeeds."

Muddenklaw gurgled a response. His battered Grosseklunge fell from numb fingers and the young warrior fell to the ground.

Wrathgar shoved the spear and Muddenklaw away from him. He could still hear Muddenklaw's gurgling breathing as he stooped and picked up his own Grosseklunge. He considered finishing Muddenklaw off but decided against it and started walking away.

"Let your last moments be prayers for Metrequia's forgiveness for you will have none of mine."

* * *

Wrathgar returned to the village three nights later dragging a wolf on a sledge the likes of which the tribe hadn't seen in generations. It was huge, about eight feet long and had once weighed about six hundred pounds. Its fangs were unusually large and jutted from its maw ferociously, similar in size to those of a sabre tooth tiger. The young

barbarian had gutted its inedible entrails, drained its blood, and eaten some of the gulden meat to make it easier to move, but it had still taken him two days to drag the huge beast all the way back to the Baarstammderstark village.

Once inside the village he set down the handles of the sledge and rested while others came to inspect it. People marvelled at the size of the creature. The great beast was riddled with wounds from flint arrows, six in total and had several large gashes from the young barbarian's Grosse Klinge, the largest of which was across the beast's throat. Wrathgar himself sat down slumped against the side of the dire wolf, trying to catch his breath.

"By Metrequia's Moonlight!" declared High Shaman Korflex. "You have earned the right to sit at Metrequia's table! Tonight we shall feast on the flesh of this great beast! Tomorrow you shall wear the wolfskin as a mantle of Metrequia's power! You are one of Metrequia's chosen!"

Wrathgar stood up slowly. He felt tired, but older. The full weight of the last week had come to him. Not the weight of the wolf, or the weight of Muddenklaw's treachery, but the weight of what he had become. He was now a man.

* * *

Water dripped down his nose and he awoke in pain and misery. It took a long time to realize he was back in the lizardfolk village, and even longer for Muddenklaw to

realize the true nature of his predicament. Yes, he was alive. He had somehow survived the chest wound that Wrathgar had dealt him, but now he was heavily shackled, tired, starving, dreadfully injured, and something worse.

He was now a slave.

End of Excerpt...

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