

Preview of:

Side Quest

*A fantastically horrifying adventure.
(With lots of zombies.)*

By Travis Adkins
©2007

All feedback, (critiques, praises, curses,
and foul obscenities,) welcomed.

PART: THE FIRST

*There's no-one who can tear me away from my audience,
Or the lass in the white dress that I haven't seen since.*

*But when the world takes control,
I've got no choice but to run away*

*To the neutral line
Where it's safe and fine
And that's where I will stay.*

*—Warrel the Suave
chorus from 'Ode to Me'*

The three adventurers departed Ravenswood and were a day's journey from Kingspointe, plodding across the pebbly trail through the mountain range known as the Eastern Spine, when the mist came. It was a palpable mist, almost spongy to the touch, like rain caught in a bubble. Clouds, especially in the mountains, were common enough, but the mist was irregular, crossing their path and engulfing them where they stood, then lingering.

"Something is amiss," uttered Kogliastro, known as Kogliastro the Wise. He was standing quite still now, examining the mist. Studying it.

"Something is amiss with the mist?" countered Warrel, known as Warrel the Suave. He stopped as well and studied the mist, all the while pretending at some greater understanding.

Kogliastro was not amused with Warrel's cuteness—nor was he ever, once Warrel pondered on it. Kogliastro was an old man, and had been an old man forever. In fact, Kogliastro was an old man when Warrel's grandfather was a toddler, and all he had to show for it was a few wrinkles, a long white beard, and a cantankerous voice.

Warrel turned around to eye Grumli jogging up the path, finally catching up. Being a dwarf and therefore short-legged, Grumli had never

been much of a sprinter. He made his way to his two companions and dropped the head of his great axe on the soil, then leaned his forearms on the handle. He was breathing hard, his long, braided moustache fluttering with every exhale.

“Why must ‘ye be running all the time?” he panted. “Run, run, run. It’s all we ever do. Might we be getting horses one of these days?”

“Horses?” Warrel echoed. “For you, a pretty little pony. But we *walk*, friend dwarf. We always walk. You merely plod along like a drunken dragon.”

“Ye run and ye know it!” Grumli retorted. “Aye’ll see how fast ye are with an axe in yer skull.”

He held up the axe and shook it in Warrel’s face in a menacing manner.

The dwarf was obviously agitated. But what else was new? All dwarves were surly. Warrel had wished for the longest time to meet one that wasn’t.

“Do you find something amiss with the mist?” Warrel asked him.

“Aye,” Grumli replied, leaning his head back to sniff at the moisture. “A thick bitch, she is. She’ll slow us down fer sure.”

For Grumli, every inanimate object in the world was feminine. His great axe, the land, the weather. The quirks of a dwarf.

Warrel turned away and scratched his chin where his immaculate goatee had once been. He was clean-shaven now, of course, having ridded himself of the goatee yesternight. He felt he was much more suave with a goatee, but knowing that he was going to be embarking on a long journey with few chances to bathe or shave, he wanted to start the trek with a fresh face.

The mist was still lingering, even as the three adventurers stayed in place to rest their legs and catch their breath. It was big and wet and blinding, and undulating with its own currents, like a fluffy white blanket hung out to dry and rustling in the wind.

Yet the road was the same, Warrel knew. They had traveled it ten times and more, and probably knew it by heart. He knew they could go on half blind if they had to. He looked skyward and tried to locate the exact position of the sun, but wasn’t able. But it was definitely up there, somewhere.

“I will sing a song fit for mist-walking,” Warrel proclaimed. “And we’ll make Kingspointe before the sun sets on the ‘morrow!”

Kogliastro uttered no audible response, and instead turned and advanced up the trail, his cone-shaped cowl jostling left, then right. Warrel and Grumli decided that that meant the wizard wished to continue, so they showed each other a silent nod, and followed.

And so it went, Kogliastro leading the way, Warrel watching his back, and Grumli watching his, trying his hardest to keep up and appear entirely able to do so despite his short legs.

Regardless of the mist, Warrel sometimes found it difficult to see the wizard, for some years ago Kogliastro had acquired a *Robe of Prismatic Colors*, which he was currently wearing on his back. It distorted light in scintillating fashion, often blurring the wizard so much so that Warrel would be damned if he didn't see ten of them. *Handy*, he knew, in preventing orcish melee fighters from ever stabbing him in the back.

Still, without being able to see the old mage, Warrel sometimes had to rely on following the clicker-clack of Kogliastro's walking stick.

"A song, mayhaps?" Warrel called out.

Kogliastro didn't reply.

"Ye've yet to sing a tale of *my* accomplishments!" Grumli interjected, quite glum.

"Because yours are not yet finished, friend dwarf," Warrel replied. "And besides, humans such as myself don't live for centuries upon centuries as dwarves do. I need to sing of my accomplishments in the here and now, while there's time!"

Then, arching his back as he walked and taking in a deep breath of air, his lungs almost rejecting the watery mist, Warrel began, "*Let's sing a little song, let's dance a little dance, let's feel a touch of true romance, and with so many pockets to pick, Warrel the Suave is just too slick—*"

"—That's a clunker, to be sure," Grumli interrupted, halting Warrel in mid-chorus.

Warrel stopped singing and lowered his head, dejected.

He had grown quite familiar with his companions over the last several months, though their personal beliefs didn't always coincide with his neutral view of things.

He had been performing in taverns all across the Central Lands when he received word that Kogliastro the Wise was not only coming out of seclusion from his tower, but coming out of retirement as well. Apparently the seasoned adventurer felt that too many had forgotten his name and his deeds. No longer known as Kogliastro the Kind or

Kogliastro the Great, he was simply Kogliastro the Wise, a hermit of a man practicing his magic sans an apprentice to impart his knowledge. Perhaps Kogliastro felt there were still plenty of adventuring days left in his bones. Perhaps he just wanted to help people so they would think kindly of him when he was gone.

Regardless, when Warrel heard that the wizard—of whom he had already written a dozen opus’—was once again on the move, he sought him out.

Grumli the dwarf, on the other hand, was much more predictable. He liked diamonds. And he liked gold. And he liked rubies. And he liked emeralds. And he *loved* mithril.

No, there wasn't much to Grumli at all, motivation-wise. Yet still, somewhere down deep he was kind-hearted, and outwardly he was built of more muscle mass than three human men combined. His many-notched axe could fell a great oak in a single swing, and decapitate ten goblins in a blink's time.

But Warrel, on the other hand, was a jack of all trades, and master of none.

Though known mostly as a minstrel, Warrel was not without his fair share of intelligence, often capturing and reciting mage scrolls in his spare time. Some he failed to master, but on good days he was able to conjure a glamer or two, temporarily blind an unruly tavern patron, or charm a dainty lass with a wave of his hand. (Though the charming part may or may not have been entirely magical. He was born with that latent gift.)

Kogliastro would call Warrel's tinkering in magics "child's play," and Warrel would agree, (he knew he was no sorcerer,) but he knew he could hold his own, at least for a while, against any mage's apprentice.

And to say he was a slouch with a blade would be presumptuous as well. He had become quite adept with a rapier, a dashing, dexterous fencer if ever there was one, and was something of a deadeye with a crossbow as well. Added to all his talents was his collection of magical artifacts, gathered and identified over the course of ten years of adventuring and pilfering, and with these assorted knickknacks he could accomplish a lot.

However, being a bard, he was often referred to as nothing more than a mere charlatan.

He didn't mind, for he knew he *was* one. If something of value was out in the open, he would take it. If a rich man wasn't minding his

purse, Warrel would mind it for him. If Warrel woke before a courtesan, he would take back the money he paid her.

And so it went, this procession of wizard, rogue, and fighter, across the pass of the Eastern Spine. It was a well-balanced troupe indeed, and they had already achieved much success. Certainly, in the end, Kogliastro would receive his fame, Grumli would receive his wealth, and Warrel would receive a bit of both, with experience to boot.

Yes, Warrel would certainly have many more exploits to pen in his lorebooks and many more songs—songs so extraordinary the mere mention of them would sell out any theatre in any land. And all he would have to do was sustain his mock smile and pretend he was in the greatest company ever.

But for the moment it was difficult, as he was walking through a dense fog with an even denser dwarf, and a wizard who never spoke a thing until he had something to say. A paradox, to be sure.

And roughly an hour after the mist appeared and the mist was still there, by now soaking through Warrel's rather pricey thistledown jerkin and hopelessly warping the polished wood of the mandolin slung across his back. Though it held no more value than any other mandolin, many a young maiden had been swept in by the notes he plucked from its strings. It was his favorite.

The path on the Eastern Spine should have forked by now, he realized. There should have been a great pile of unnatural obsidian crags littering the road, followed by a bend around a high cliff known as Smuggler's Bluff, followed by a split in the path, one ascending northerly, the other descending down the southern slope.

Yet there had been no landmark of black crags, no Smuggler's Bluff, and no fork in the path. His group wasn't ascending, so he knew he hadn't lost focus and accidentally taken the northern road. He couldn't recall the Eastern Spine being so flat either. It seemed he was traversing a plateau instead of a mountain.

He decided to voice his concerns to Kogliastro.

"Yes, something is indeed amiss," Kogliastro reiterated, before Warrel could speak at all.

"Amisss," Warrel breathed. "I loathe when you say that."

Kogliastro stopped walking and turned around. Warrel took a step backward, thinking perhaps the old wizard had heard him complaining. He eyed Kogliastro curiously, trying to peer beneath the cowl the wizard

was wearing low across his face. Only his nose and long white beard managed to show through.

“We are no longer on the Eastern Spine,” said Kogliastro.

“Eh?” Grumli grunted, stepping up beside Warrel and trying not to appear too out of breath. “Then where in the great twin axes are we?”

“I am uncertain,” Kogliastro replied.

He lifted his hand, his flowing robe waving beneath his arm, and spread his fingers, caressing the mist. But he said nothing.

“She ain’t natural!” said Grumli, spitting with every syllable. “This is a magical mist! And ye know what I despise more ‘an anything? Magic! *Pttooie!*” He spit, this time sincerely. He turned back to the wizard and apologetically added, “No offense to human wizards, of course. Or *whatever ye are.*”

Warrel gulped and said, “We’ve seen no other travelers. No monks, no caravans. Not even a highwayman.”

He got no reply.

He continued, with a raised index finger, “I’ve heard tales of ice dragons who have learned to breathe great fogs, luring and trapping unwary travelers. The travelers wander for many days until they collapse from exhaustion, making easy pickings for the hungry dragon. Devoured without a fight.” Then as an afterthought he added, “*Perhaps I should write a song about it.*”

“If a tale like that was true,” Grumli intervened, “then who’d be alive to tell it?”

Warrel scratched his naked chin, (he pined for his manly goatee,) and pondered the dwarf’s words. They made sense enough.

Then they heard a noise, the sound of footsteps off the path, to their left. Warrel realized that it was the first sound he had heard for the longest time—the first sound not caused by his or the dwarf’s footsteps, or the wizard’s walking stick. There wasn’t even a howling wind, which should have been common this high up on the mountain.

The sound of the strange footsteps put the trio on their guard. Kogliastro lifted his walking stick and it vibrated with mysterious energies. Surges of blue electricity circled their way to the bulbous point at the end, culminating there, gathering and swirling impatiently, ready to be aimed and launched.

Grumli lifted his many-notched axe. He growled.

Warrel wrapped his palm around the hilt of his rapier, but did not yet draw it. Its blade was solid silver and enchanted by Kogliastro several

months back to prevent it from breakage. It was the best weapon he had ever owned, and would definitely kill a werebeast in its tracks, should he ever cross one.

The footsteps were coming closer, growing more and more audible with each second. The soft, untended soil on the sides of the path absorbed the impact of the footsteps, but when they reached the rocky road, the adventurers realized that the footsteps were exceedingly heavy.

THUMP-THUMP!

THUMP-THUMP!

THUMP-THUMP!

“Ye’ll see a giant, fer sure,” Grumli hoarsely whispered. “Leave it to me. A gash into its hamstrings and ye’ll see her tumble. Care fer a wager?”

Though he had been speaking to Warrel, Warrel didn’t reply. He simply gulped, and steadied himself.

And, sure enough, when the cause of the loud footsteps broke through the mist, it was indeed a giant. Thankfully it was one of the lesser breeds—a simple ogre. It was covered in black soot from head to toe as if it had been rooting in ash. And, as ogres go, this one was especially ugly, its big nose curved downwards and squashed nearly flat. One eyelid was swollen shut. Its tattered yetiskin loincloth was barely covering its privates. Its right hand held only a loose grip on its great wooden club, the bulk of the club itself scraping along the trail. The ogre appeared too exhausted to fully lift it. And it was limping, Warrel noticed, favoring its left foot as if it had stepped on a fangthorn.

But it was *big*, as all giant breeds tend to be, standing at least two Warrel’s high, and almost three Grumli’s.

Grumli wasn’t dissuaded, however, and boldly stepped forward. He declared, “Ye won’t be collectin’ a toll from us, ye ugly bastard!”

The ogre didn’t reply, and merely opened its mouth partway, showing rotted teeth, and snarled. A line of drool escaped its lips and dribbled down its chin, carrying black soot with it.

Warrel didn’t have time to ponder the realization that ogres weren’t native to this region. Trolls, maybe. Wingdeaths, definitely. But ogres, no.

Grumli had already advanced. He cried, “Ye shoulda gone back to yer cave, big fella! Now I’m gonna smite the last breath outta ya! Prepare ta meet yer ancestors!”

That actually surprised Warrel none at all. They all three were familiar with this dance.

Grumli would always attack first, working not only as a vanguard, but as a blockade as well, which allowed Warrel strategic thrusts with his rapier or to belt out a morale-boosting song, which, in turn, allowed Kogliastro ample time to prepare his most powerful spells.

In this instance, however, none of their standard formations were necessary.

Grumli leaped up nearly past his own height, reeling back the blade of his many-notched axe the entire ascent, and, when he reached the pinnacle of his jump, he swung his axe full force. The air whistled around the sharp blade as Grumli growled, emphasizing the point home.

The blade buried itself very deep inside the ogre's sternum, lodging itself there. Black soot puffed off of the giant's chest and freely intermingled with the watery mist enveloping them.

Grumli fell awkwardly to the ground, (just as all graceless dwarves are known to do,) but quickly regained his footing.

The giant glanced down at the blade protruding from its chest for the briefest of moments, then it came tumbling, falling backwards with the straightest of postures, landing all at once on its back, sending rocks and pebbles scattering away from the impact in a chaotic scuttle. The earth shook.

Then all was quiet again.

"Ha!" laughed Grumli, dusting off his breeches and adjusting the shoulder pauldrons of his customized platemail. "I told ye! I told ye! How much was our wager, bard? Tell me, how much do ye owe me?"

Warrel nonchalantly straightened his jerkin, but couldn't prevent stuttering his response: "There, uh... there was no wager, dwarf."

Kogliastro paid no attention to the post-fight banter. Instead he waved his hand across his walking stick, quelling the electrical energies he had earlier materialized, forcing them to subside for use at a later time.

"Well," Grumli went on, hands on hips, "Certainly ye'll at least write this down in yer books! Another ogre felled by Grumli of the Steelfist Clan!"

"Um, sure," Warrel replied. "I'll get right on that."

"Ye sure will. And ye'll do it *now!*" His next statement was whispered: "*And they told me me cousin Grando had all the muscle. Bah!*"

Warrel shrugged his shoulders, rolled his eyes, and turned away. Though the ogre was dead, the mist was still everywhere, and that problem was definitely far from being solved.

For the love of the great gods, *where were they?*

He gazed upon Kogliastro, wondering if the wizard had determined a way out of this predicament. He further wondered if Kogliastro knew the windwalk spells like the barbarian shamans of the northern tundra. And, furthermore, even if he did, could he carry two in tow?

Grumli set about the task of retrieving his axe, grumbling the entire time.

“Ungrateful, ye are.” He climbed up on top of the fallen giant, walking across its great barrel chest to where his axe was planted. “I do all the work, so ye two can relax and not get sweaty. Conserve yer energy, I says. Let me handle this ‘un, I says. And what thanks?”

He wrapped his meaty dwarven hands around the handle of his axe and hefted.

But the axe would not budge.

He gazed over at his two companions, but neither was looking his direction, much less offering assistance.

“Ungrateful,” Grumli grumbled. “That be yer new names: Warrel the Ungrateful. Kogliastro the No-Helpin’ Ungrateful Wizard. Aye. That fits ye right.”

Grumli crouched down on the giant’s chest, pulling down on the axe handle, hoping that a change of direction would give greater momentum.

But instead of the axe moving, the giant did.

It sat up with a snarl. The axe was still planted in its chest, yet the giant was definitely not dead, nor even did it seem too concerned with removing the foreign object right away.

Grumli tumbled backwards, head over feet, colliding awkwardly with the ground yet again.

Warrel was too stunned to take action, and Kogliastro was too far away, apparently in a trance.

The seemingly dead ogre sat up and bellowed a breathless groan that sent shivers all over Warrel’s body. It snapped its head forward to focus on the dwarf nearby. Grumli was just then lifting himself to his feet.

The ogre reached out with both massive hands and wrapped them around Grumli’s torso, pinning his arms helplessly to his sides. It lifted Grumli into the air and brought him close. It opened its mouth wide.

Grumli turned his head away to avoid the rancid breath, scrunching up his nose, and cursed, “Aye, ye’re a foul-smellin’ bastard, aren’t ye?!”

Warrel was still frightened into inaction, but it may have been too late anyway, though he would never know.

The ogre batted away Grumli's horned helmet with a swipe of its jaw, then situated Grumli's head within its mouth. It chomped down, burying its teeth deep in Grumli's skull.

A scream then emanated from Grumli—far from a dwarven battle cry, his was a cry of pain and despair. Grumli's short dwarven legs flailed about, gaining momentum for naught.

Though a dwarf's skull was thick, it wouldn't be thick enough. The ogre, in a surge, bit down all the way, forcing his teeth together and separating the top half of Grumli's head just below his ears. And there were no more sounds coming from Grumli.

The ogre began chewing its first bite, holding Grumli's quivering body like a big loaf of bread. Dark red blood flowed from its mouth and down its chin, turning into a veritable river as it poured onto its chest and over its loins.

It swallowed and took another bite, this time taking the rest of Grumli's head around the much softer neck area. The dirt around the giant was now a mess of blood, black soot, and clumps of brain. Blood continued flowing out of its mouth and from Grumli's severed neck. And then came Grumli's last disgrace, a rank stench wafting to Warrel's nostrils.

The dwarf had soiled himself.

Willing his legs into action, Warrel managed two steps backwards.

A magical stream of fiery flame shot through the air, guided by Kogliastro's outstretched hand, barely missing Warrel, hissing the entire way. The flame collided with the ogre's head and in the next instant it burst in an explosion of gunk and skull fragments, peppering Warrel's face with crimson dots.

The top half of the ogre fell backward.

It was dead again.

PART: THE SECOND

*I don't like you
And you don't like me,
But we have so many things to see.*

*Let's be off now
From this rancid place.
(Why not remove your mask
So I can see your face?)*

—*Warrel the Suave*
bridge from 'Questing with Strangers'

Warrel took inventory of his possessions. The mandolin was utterly ruined and beyond repair, so he dropped it. The pouch dangling from his right hip still held his magical knickknacks, thankfully, so he patted it comfortingly. His silver rapier was still in its sheathe on his left hip and it, too, he patted comfortingly. He had a small crossbow strapped to his back loaded with six Bolts of Blunting. Those were fine.

He removed his cloak from his backpack. The cloak, made of waterproofed winterwolf hide, would protect him from the cold. He wrapped it around his shoulders, latched the clasp, and raised the hood over his head, smushing his long greasy hair. He wanted to toss the waterlogged backpack, as the mist had weighed it down severely, but it still contained his lorebooks, pens, and inks. And he didn't want to be lugging those around in his hands.

He stood.

The mist swirled and undulated around him, causing cold, sweat-like beads of moisture to gather on his cheeks. He shivered, despite the warmth of his cloak.

Kogliastro was facing away from him, and away from the bodies, absorbed in the mystery of the mist. He leaned on his walking stick,

almost calmly, his Robe of Prismatic Colors blurring him in Warrel's sight, his coned hood somehow mocking him.

"You will deliver us to Kingspointe, old man," said Warrel to the wizard's back. Then, louder, "You will get us out of this wretched fog. Do you hear me?"

Kogliastro didn't bother to turn to face him. Instead of answering the question directly, he smited him with his next words: "When the going is easy, you hide your true motivations well. But when the going is hard, you are quick to reveal you are only in it for the tale, and the tale alone. This is why you are not my apprentice."

"Don't flatter yourself! I never asked to be your apprentice!" Warrel retorted, jabbing hard with his pointed index finger at the open air between him and the wizard.

"Yet it is what you desire, to be something more," Kogliastro calmly said. "You still remain a dabbler, a dilettante, unprofessional in everything you do—save *thievery*."

Warrel gritted his teeth. He turned away and ground his feet into the rocky soil. He tried to regain his composure.

He declared, "I am Warrel the Suave. I am known throughout the lands as the greatest musician of our generation. And what of you, old man? Trying to reclaim your glory days? You need me more than I need you. There's no one else to boast of your deeds in such a grand fashion as I. Time has forgotten you."

"And what is *time*?" asked the wizard, rhetorically. "Time is an invented thing, considered only by the motions and cycles of heavenly bodies."

"Oh, splendiferous," Warrel scoffed. "Go on believing that."

The mist continued floating about them, unhindered. Warrel found it difficult to see merely twenty paces away. Yet the wizard was staring off into the distance, definitely at something in particular.

Warrel turned to him. His voice was calmer now. "And what do you propose our next course of action to be?"

"Off of this trail," replied Kogliastro, with decisive firmness. "We are no longer on the Eastern Spine. I do not know where we are, but to expect to find something at the end of this road is foolishness."

Warrel cautiously stepped up to him and looked into the milky haze, trying to see what the wizard saw. But he saw nothing. He looked over at the wizard, at the beard flowing from the hood and at the shadows that blanketed his eyes. The wizard's focus, however, lay elsewhere.

Kogliastro lifted one of his crooked, old man fingers and pointed into nothingness. He narrated, "There is a human there. Or a humanoid, in the least."

Warrel squinted. "I see nothing."

"I see nothing either," Kogliastro replied. "All the same, there is a human there."

"How do you know this?"

"I have meditated for the last several minutes," Kogliastro explained, slowly lowering his arm and clutching his walking stick with both hands. "I have attuned my senses to detect the one thing this blasted mist lacks... *heat*. Over there, I sense heat. It comes to me as the same temperature as we."

"Yes then," said Warrel, "By all means let us go chasing this heat, not knowing what foul thing awaits us there."

"That is not necessary. You can remain here."

The wizard started walking. His feet soon left the road and he ascended the small hill alongside it, calmly guiding prickly bushes out of his path with his walking stick.

Warrel waited until he crested the hill, and then he could wait no more. Though the distance between him and the old man was a mere thirty steps away, he dashed it.

He felt somehow blessed to leave the road behind. The areas on either side were uncharted, and he told himself that that was what a wanderer should do: wander the uncharted path.

When he caught up with Kogliastro, he gave one last glance behind him at the corpse of Grumli Steelfist, wondering for the briefest of moments if there were any items the dwarf carried that could be of any use to him. He wasn't able to decide. Only because Kogliastro continued walking, and Warrel did not want to lose sight of him, did he forego thoughts of scavenging the body.

The area to the side of the road was definitely not the Eastern Spine. Though there was only an occasional scattering of trees, plantlife thrived here. A few frogs and toads hopped about, and Warrel could definitely hear the resonance of running water. It sounded like a gentle stream. He would love to have a drink just then.

His thirst made him angry, and that anger gained momentum.

"Tell me, Kogliastro," he said, "do you think yourself benevolent?"

"Better than some, worse than others," came the unconcerned reply.

“Tell me then, Kogliastro, why we have just left our companion to rot on that gods-forsaken road?” Warrel jerked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating the way they had come.

“Sing a song, bard,” the wizard said. “Sing a song about your plight, for the dwarf’s has ended.”

“Bah!” Warrel snidely replied. “If I were to sing a song, it would concern all the things you are not telling me. You *know* things, wizard, and you are not being forthcoming.”

“I know *many* things.”

“Then, by all means, *share*.”

“You really wish to know?”

“I do.”

“Well then,” said Kogliastro, maintaining his stride and his focus, pushing through the mist, determined, his walking stick sometimes sinking in mud. “Though our friend Grumli has departed the flesh to join with his gods and his ancestors, heat still radiated from his body. It was dissipated, yes, but it was there.”

“It will grow cold soon enough,” Warrel chimed.

“Indeed,” Kogliastro said. “Yet the ogre’s body was as cold as this air we are breathing. And had been for some time.”

Warrel lost his stride for a moment, then regained it and caught up with the wizard. “And what does that mean?” he asked. “That the ogre was dead even when it first approached us?”

“Indeed.”

“Then the root of our problem here lies within the dark magics of a necromancer.”

“That would be a fair assumption.”

“Then use your own magics to locate this son of a boar’s ass—”

But the wizard brought a hand up then, and silenced Warrel. He pointed ahead of them and said, “The heat I detected earlier is emanating from there.”

Warrel followed with his eyes to where Kogliastro’s finger was pointing and soon rested his focus upon a growth of weeds under a mossy weeping willow. The branches hung quite low, nearly to the ground, and in contrast, the weeds growing below were climbing upward courageously, occasionally meeting the willow branches with supple kisses. The mist was purely milky white beyond the tree, revealing to Warrel the tree and nothing more, and he felt then that this was the

most depressing sight he had ever beheld, even in this most depressing of lands.

Something rustled in the weeds below the willow.

Warrel and Kogliastro stepped closer. The earth was soggy beneath their heels and any grass and foliage was likewise softened, muting their footsteps. Warrel wrapped his palm around the hilt of his silver rapier.

However, when they came upon the human form lying prone in the weeds and were given a moment to decipher the image they saw, their tenseness receded. For lying there in a supine position in a restless, likely nightmarish sleep, was a very slim, lightly-armored human female.

Above all else, Warrel noticed first her beauty. The features of her face were soft and delicate, perfectly proportionate save for her cheekbones, which were somewhat sharp and exaggerated. Her skin was the color of alabaster, and her long, flowing hair the color of amber. Her upper body was covered in a chainmail cuirass, her legs covered in a scanty silken skirt and knee-high chainboots, all pristinely white except for an occasional adornment of turquoise gems embedded in the armor. The rest of her legs were bare, (and, admittedly, Warrel was distracted by this,) her polished skin glistening from moisture, droplets of gathered mist dripping from her legs and face.

It was obvious she had been exposed to this mist for hours, yet she continued sleeping, her face tensing up at moments when certainly, in her mind, horrible things were happening. Near her left hand, just out of her reach, was a diamond-edged mace adorned in turquoise gems, and likely enchanted. Warrel knew that certain religions frowned upon their warriors drawing blood in battle, and so those warriors would wield blunt weapons to bash skulls rather than to pierce skin, hence the mace. (It was all hypocritical, in Warrel's opinion, since any instrument of death always yielded the same result, regardless of how much blood was spilled.)

He put the last clue into place when he glanced back up to her cuirass, which bore the insignia of one of the more dominant faiths in the realms.

"She is a priestess of the Divine Maiden," he whispered. "What in the nine hells is she doing here?"

Kogliastro did not reply to him, and instead addressed the fallen priestess. "Awaken, cleric," he said with grandfatherly gentleness, "and know that our intention is not to harm you."

The cleric's eyes immediately fluttered open then, (her pupils were a stunning greenish hue,) and she gazed upon the strangers looming over her. Her small mouth parted to give way to a gasp induced of sheer panic. She scrambled backwards in a crabwalk, and Warrel unashamedly peered at her bare legs, which at this angle he could follow very far up her skirt, even to her tiny undergarment, (also pristinely white,) and likewise salivate at the delicate way it snuggled her undercurve.

He rapidly shook his head to shake away the lust and regain his concentration.

When he lifted his gaze and saw that the locks of her amber hair had fallen away from her ears, that her ears were sharpened skyward. This, at least, explained her beauty, for her telltale pointed ears revealed that she had at least one generation of elven blood in her ancestry. And though she appeared roughly his own age, (middle twenties in human years,) her extended lifespan would probably make her true age double that. He also suspected that her voice would be more of a symphony of melodic tones rather than an utterance of collected syllables, as did the voices of every half-elf he had encountered.

This one would turn out to be no exception.

After she glanced over to her discarded mace and realized it was now too far out of reach—and likely cursing herself for abandoning her weapon—she returned her focus to the two strangers above her and said, very plainly, “*You will give me your names.*”

“I am Kogliastro,” Kogliastro told her, proudly standing erect and folding his hands on his walking stick. “Let that be enough said of who I am.”

“Kogliastro?” she echoed, eyes wandering up and to the right, showing deep thought. “That name escapes me. I haven't heard it spoken.”

Kogliastro grunted.

Warrel let slip a wry chuckle.

The cleric relaxed, settling her posterior back on the earth, but remaining sitting. She looked from Kogliastro to Warrel, and showed him an inquisitive gaze.

“I am Warrel,” Warrel told her, bowing grandiosely, then returning upright. “Oft referred to as *Warrel the Suave*, Musician, Singer, Songwriter, Loremaster, Spellslinger, Swordsman, Tinkerer, Thespian,

occasional Juggler, Bard of Kings, Minstrel Extraordinaire, Professional Dilettante, and Mountain of Molten Lust, *at your service.*”

“You, I have heard of,” she replied after a moment.

“Then, won’t you stand?” he asked.

“I find I am unable,” she said, gazing downward, almost submissively. “My head still feels light. It met with a rock during my tumble, and wasn’t the harder of the two.”

“Shall I take a look?” Kogliastro offered.

The cleric looked at the wizard and asked, “Are you a friend, Kogliastro?”

“Indeed,” Kogliastro replied.

“Then I will have to take you at your word,” she said, bowing her head low to give him easy access to the back of her cranium. “This land takes friends, rather than provide them.”

“Indeed,” said Kogliastro again, gingerly setting down his walking stick and kneeling behind the fallen cleric.

Warrel stepped over to them and looked over the wizard’s shoulder. Sure enough, the back of the priestess’ head was marked with dried blood, much of it staining her hair. Kogliastro used his fingers to guide her hair away, strand by strand, until the wound was exposed to him. It was a vicious bruise. The indentation of the rock that caused it was still evident. When Kogliastro’s finger accidentally grazed the discolored skin, they saw the cleric shudder and wince.

“I called upon my goddess to heal me,” the cleric softly said. Warrel could have sworn he heard her snuffle, as if she was sobbing just then, but with her head turned away he couldn’t be certain. She continued, “I called upon her... but she is not here. My goddess is not with me. I do not feel her presence... in this land at all.” She hesitated a moment, and added, “Farngold Glittershins... he was one of my companions. He was a Halfling. He was my friend. I could have saved him if my goddess were with me.”

She uttered more, but she was trailing off and Warrel couldn’t understand her.

“What is your name, friend cleric?” Kogliastro asked.

“Arika,” she replied. “Priestess of the First Order of the Divine Maiden.”

“You spoke of having companions...?”

“Adventurers,” she replied. “I joined them on their journey south in

the hopes of spreading the word of my faith. A ranger, a fighter, and... and my friend, the Halfling, Farngold.”

“What became of them?”

“Gone.”

“Gone? How?” Warrel asked.

“How do you think?!” she snapped, her melodic voice taking on a twinge of a snarl. “Devoured by the undead!”

“But—”

Kogliastro interrupted Warrel with an upraised hand. Referring to the nasty bruise on the cleric’s head, he asked, “Have you any elixirs?”

Warrel thought for a moment, then replied, “None. Our former companion Grumli consumed them all before we departed Ravenswood, drowning himself as though they were merely copper-piece pints of mead.”

“Ravenswood?” Arika interjected. “You come from Ravenswood?”

“Indeed,” Kogliastro told her.

“A long way from here...”

“A long way?” Warrel mocked. “It’s but half a day’s journey.”

“A *half a day*? What manner of steed are you riding?”

“Silence,” Kogliastro commanded, of both of them. “From where did your troupe depart, Priestess Arika?”

“Griffon’s Gate.”

“That would place you north of Helmsboro.”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

Kogliastro stood up, gathering his walking stick in his shaky, old man’s hands. He stepped out from under the willow and back into the mist, away from the minstrel and the cleric. He spun around slowly, several times, his head turning this way and that. He began uttering syllables, and Warrel couldn’t discern whether those syllables formed the beginnings of a magic spell, or if they were simply senile mutterings or frustrated obscenities.

Even stranger, the wizard was almost entirely visible now. The power of his Robe of Prismatic Colors was obviously fading.

Arika, still sitting quite uncomfortably on the soggy earth, turned her head to Warrel. She commanded, “I feel that I can stand now. Assist me to my feet, bard.”

Warrel obliged, cupping his palms beneath her armpits and gently lifting her to her feet. He was tempted to ‘accidentally’ brush his hand

across her breasts, but wisely decided against it. He figured mischievously fondling a cleric would be a lot like flirting with a paladin. It was a lost cause, and would probably result in nothing more than a bruised ego—or worse, like a curse of some manner brought down upon him by their gods.

'Tis a pity that such beauty is wasted on something as hokey as religion, he thought.

Once on her feet, she brushed herself off, adjusted her cuirass and straightened her skirt. She ran her hands through her hair and tucked it behind her pointed ears.

Warrel picked her mace up off the ground and offered it to her handle-first. Even with only a quick appraisal he knew it had to be worth a fortune. But he had to let it go.

“Your weapon, m’lady,” he said.

“My thanks,” she replied, accepting the mace and slipping it into the metal loop in her armor that served as a sheathe. She motioned toward Kogliastro with a nod of her head and whispered, to Warrel alone, “His magic will lose its potency the longer he remains here. This... *place*... corrupts, perverts—and *devours*—anything that is righteous and good. Even the ranger that was of my company was not immune to this land’s effects. He walked with a familiar—a *wolf*. When we arrived here, his wolf abandoned him.”

“And what happened to it?” Warrel asked. “Is it going to make a meal of us?”

“Not likely,” Arika continued, yet despite her reassuring words she was noticeably shivering. “It never attacked us. No, no. It stayed always away from us, watching from afar, as if... *conflicted*. We could sometimes catch sight of the wolf wandering in our perimeter, but it refused to return to its master. Be thankful your wizard friend does not possess a familiar, because I fear it would abandon even him. And a wizard’s familiar, I think, would be far more dangerous than a ranger’s. And this *mist*...” She looked up, down, and all around before finishing, “...just never goes away.”

“I sort of noticed that.”

“And you, wizard,” she said, loudly, causing Kogliastro to slowly turn to face them. “Why the odd expression when I told you I hail from Helmsboro? Are we far from there?”

“A dragon’s flight or more,” Kogliastro absently replied after a

moment, appearing distracted by something else entirely. “But we are neither here nor there.”

Arika frowned, which caused Warrel to frown as well. He knew that if even a devoted priestess blessed with the powers of the gods was dismayed, then what cause for hope did a swindling minstrel have, regardless of how famous he was in the world of men?

“Why am I so far from where I started?!” Arika asked, her panic belying the rationale with which she began the conversation. “What is this place?!”

“I have a vague suspicion,” Kogliastro calmly replied. “Though, I do not wish to voice it yet.”

Arika let slip something that sounded a lot like a scoff. She was definitely a *young cleric*, which was probably why she couldn’t keep her baser emotions in check. She turned to Warrel.

Warrel shrugged his shoulders and mumbled, “See what I have to put up with?”

Kogliastro walked back to them and folded one of his hands over his walking stick while the other was lifted to point at something none of them could see.

He stated, “Magic. Powerful magic. Over there, beyond the horizon.”

Warrel and Arika’s heads turned, though they could see nothing through the haze. Their heads soon turned back to Kogliastro.

Even through the shadows of the wizard’s hood, Warrel could glimpse a grin peeking through the strands of white beard. And with that smile transfixed, Kogliastro chimed an answer to Warrel’s unspoken question. “One can never reach the horizon or perhaps even see the horizon, my dear Warrel, but one should always *strive to*.”

“Then, by all means,” Warrel returned, smugly, “let’s go chasing the horizon and the powerful, definitely evil magic that awaits us there.”

“That’s the spirit,” Kogliastro said, stepping two paces away from his much younger companions. “And perhaps there we will discover the source of this misty phenomenon.”

Warrel gulped, and he and Arika quietly stared at each other, as if waiting for the other to make a move. The wizard continued walking, and by now it was obvious he was moving on with or without them.

Finally Arika looked away from Warrel and turned her focus to the departing wizard, who was now entirely visible since the power of his cloak was consumed. She called out, “Wait for me, friend.”

She trotted away, following Kogliastro.

Warrel stared first at the empty whiteness beyond the willow, then at the powerful yet decrepit wizard bleeding into the mist in the other direction, and then at the female figure that followed him, at the fluttering skirt that barely reached midway down her thigh and at the long legs flowing out of them.

There was no choice at all.

He ran to catch up.

Only when the painfully depressing weeping willow was at least fifty paces behind him did he slow his stride to keep pace beside the young half-elf. He knew that in order to stay sane he needed vocal interaction with someone other than a peculiar old wizard or disagreeable dwarf. Even though her northern accent exuded haughtiness, it was somehow comforting. She was, after all, righteous.

She curiously glanced over at him, so he showed her the practiced, suave grin he was famous for.

“You’ve heard of me, have you?” he asked.

She blushed —actually *blushed*, he noticed —and lowered her gaze to the uninteresting weeds at their feet, watching her bootsteps. But there might have been a smile. She lifted her hand to reposition her hair behind one of her ears.

They continued walking. Warrel was very careful to never slow down enough that Kogliastro escaped his sight.

“I was in attendance at one of your performances,” Arika blurted, after an uncomfortable silence. “Two years ago. At Serenity Tavern in Bloomsburg.”

“Ah, *Serenity Tavern*,” Warrel replied, a grin of his own forming. “That place was not so aptly named as I recall. Dare I ask what a fine, upstanding priestess of the Divine Maiden was *doing* in such a seedy atmosphere?”

She giggled awkwardly, and answered, “Bard, you knoweth not the first thing about my faith, do you?”

“Enlighten me.”

“Well, for one,” she said, “my goddess encourages her followers to *participate* in worldly activities. How can we hope to convert the masses if we don’t even understand them?”

“Sounds logical enough.”

“Truth is like a long, lost friend, isn’t it?”

“Religiosity is not for Warrel the Suave,” Warrel said. “I should warn you of that now. If you try to convert me, you’ll fail.”

“Fair enough.”

“So did you enjoy the performance at Serenity Tavern?”

“Well...” she began, trailing off. Her gaze lifted skyward and it was obvious she was finding it difficult to select the appropriate words. After a time, she continued, “You’re a pioneer, perhaps. You strum the mandolin a little too violently for my tastes. Your music is... *heavy*, is how I would describe it.”

“You disapprove? Are you another one of my critics who swears my compositions are the sole cause of deviance and delinquency in innocent children?”

“I never said *that*. Look... I’m intimidated by your celebrity, I’ll admit, but we won’t be rubbing groins any time soon. And if your eyeballs attempt to peek up my skirt again, or if your hand even slightly grazes my posterior, I’ll spin a curse that’ll have you vomiting frogs for a *week*.”

Warrel gulped and for a moment lost his stride.

Arika picked up her pace and stepped ahead of him, leaving him to caress his ego. He pulled his cloak tightly around himself and quietly followed.

From back here, her hips did indeed have a nice sway to them.

In the very least, there is now candy for mine eyes, Warrel mused. A welcome distraction —though not ample compensation —for my certain death in this gods-forsaken land.

PART: THE THIRD

*What do you see when you look at me?
Am I your golden clover in the deep blue sea?
My mind is mute
And I can't refute
You could be the love of my life
But you only waste my precious time*
—Warrel the Suave
chorus from 'The Exquisite Paladin'

All around them the land was growing darker. The mist was no longer shimmering as it had been before, when some unknown sun was shining down. It had happened so gradually Warrel almost didn't notice.

It must be twilight here, in this place, he figured. Wherever this place is.

He was uncertain of how far they had walked. The landscape changed now and then, sometimes grassy, sometimes rocky, sometimes boggy. But the mist was inexorable. All he knew was that his legs were beginning to ache just a little. However, he was in good health as far as musicians go, so he knew he could travel on through the night if need be.

But that old wizard, Kogliastro —*curse his hide*—was still walking along with an almost youthful exuberance. He was still up ahead, in front of them, pushing through the mist.

This is a test for him, Warrel reasoned. And he thinks vanquishing whatever foe awaits him is what will bring him fame again.

Furthermore, Warrel reasoned that he himself had a very good chance of surviving this odd ordeal, since Kogliastro would require a

loremaster to scribe his account. So certainly the wizard would protect him at any length.

He hoped.

“It is so quiet here,” he heard Arika say, just up ahead, between him and Kogliastro.

“Was that statement directed at me?” Warrel asked her. “I didn’t realize I was permitted to speak to you, o’ holy one.”

Arika stopped walking and crossed her arms as she turned to face him. Warrel, however, continued walking past her without giving her a second glance.

She allowed him to get a few steps ahead before angrily stomping up and keeping pace alongside him. “This simply will not do,” she declared. Surprisingly, her voice was still melodic even when she was obviously irked. She went on, “I lost friends in this mist. They were plucked away from me by undead hands, and... eaten... *alive*. So the last thing I want, bard, is to harken balderdash from a buffoon.”

Warrel smirked. “Do your sacred scriptures teach you these insults?”

“How dare you mock my faith!” she screamed, clenching her fists and gritting her teeth. “You unwashed heathen!”

Up ahead, Kogliastro turned around for just a brief moment to investigate the conflict behind him, then faced forward again with a sigh. He continued walking.

Warrel and Arika continued walking as well, and continued bantering.

“Well then,” Warrel said, still with a smirk, “whatever plucked your companions from the mist will have no trouble at all locating us now. Could you please speak more loudly? I don’t believe they all heard you.”

“You’re insufferable,” she said, but this time her tone didn’t rise above a whisper.

“Don’t you find it amusing, though,” Warrel went on, gaining momentum, “That if we had met in a tavern somewhere, instead of this foul place, that that teeny pantalet you’re wearing under there would be eagerly discarded next to the mattress you’d be laying on —*beneath me*, I might add —while you’re giddily singing praises to the very same goddess you’ve been speaking so highly of?”

She stuttered, “You... I cannot believe... the *nerve*...”

Warrel eyed her suavely, despite her frustration (or perhaps because of it,) and went on, “I tell you this, *you scrumptious little half-elf*:

regardless of any vow of celibacy you may or may not have taken, even you would be unable to resist me were I in my element.”

She opened her mouth then to give a retort, possibly, but Warrel knew he had her so flustered she probably wasn't thinking straight.

He continued, “But to address your original comment, regarding the quiet... Be thankful my dwarf companion had his head devoured by an undead ogre, or else the silence you were enjoying would be interrupted early and often by the foulest belches and gaseous backside burps.”

“You jest at your friend's demise?” she stammered.

“Have you ever traveled with a dwarf? They're witless, they smell, and they have iddy-biddy bugs in their beards... Oh, I apologize —was that racist of me?”

“You—”

“And what of you?” Warrel interrupted. “Your companions, including the Halfling you mentioned, this *Farngold* —are dead and gone. Your goddess has abandoned you as well. So now you seek absolution. You reason that by traveling with an old wizard and a famous bard you will somehow right all the wrongs you weren't able to on your own.”

Arika didn't reply.

Warrel went on, “Or perhaps you merely seek sanctuary. Alas, m'lady, I regret to inform you that you will find neither absolution nor sanctuary in this land. In actuality, the best you can hope for is that I forgive your righteous attitude and allow you to lay naked in front of me, and situated with those shiny legs of yours spread in warm welcome and your teats aimed at the heavens—” Warrel intentionally glanced down at her bosom, which caused her to cross her arms again to block his view. He chuckled, then finished, “And —*if I feel so inclined* — you'll have a few comings before the undead that devoured your friends —but not you, I must add —find us and tear us apart.”

Arika lowered her head, but didn't lose pace with him. Her hair slipped away from her ears and concealed her face.

Warrel heard her sniffle.

So he skipped straight to the finale: “Tell me one thing, cleric... How was it that you were not devoured? Did you run? Tell me... did you run when your goddess abandoned you, and your companions were screaming for their lives? Did you run so hard and so fast that you slipped and cracked your crown on a rock, and lay there cold and frightened until we happened upon you?”

And then he got a result even better than he hoped for: the cleric took two more fragile steps forward, wobbling almost, before she broke down in front of him, collapsing to her knees and covering her face with her palms. Her tears leaked through her fingers, however, and her sobs were heard by Kogliastro.

Up ahead, he stopped and turned around once more.

He shouted, “ENOUGH!”

There was a thunderous boom and the air itself seemed to shake, and that single command alone reverberated all around even though there were no mountains to cause such an echo.

Warrel took two steps back and put his hands in the air, displaying his palms, showing surrender. He had seen Kogliastro angry before and it wasn’t a desirable sight to behold. Wizards tended to have an ominous glow about them when they were infuriated.

Kogliastro strode back to the fallen cleric and hovered over her, all the while glaring at Warrel.

“I knew from the moment we happened upon this cleric the circumstances of her fate,” Kogliastro informed him, his beard bouncing and his knuckles turning white due to the firmness of the grip he had on his walking stick. “Such conclusions come from wisdom and knowledge of this world and its inhabitants. She did something she is not proud of—but her actions kept her alive. If it took you this long to deduce this, then *you* are the fool.”

Warrel stuttered, “A wha... bu... she dared speak *down* to me.”

“You are always too eager to demonstrate your misguided wit and single out weaknesses of others. All you wished was to cut her down and humiliate her. You will never be my apprentice.”

“*Enough of this apprentice rubbish!*” Warrel shouted. “Why would I need your parlor tricks?! I am *famous*, Kogliastro! I am known far and wide, anywhere and everywhere!”

“But it’s not enough for you, is it?”

“Please, stop,” a voice from below them pleaded.

Arika uncovered her face and gazed up at them. Wet tears still clung to her cheeks and her lips were pouting. And, despite his character, Warrel couldn’t help but feel his heart fall into the pit of his stomach. He swallowed hard and looked away, shifting his feet uneasily.

“Yes, Warrel, you were right,” she said, her voice slightly stronger than a whimper. “I held up my blessed mace and commanded the

undead to turn away. Yet they did not. When my powers failed me, I succumbed to cowardice.”

Warrel turned back to face her again. He said, “I did not say—”

“But if I can find absolution,” she went on, “even it means by giving my life for yours, bard, I will do it.” She looked over to Kogliastro. “May we continue our journey now?”

“Indeed.”

Warrel timidly extended his hand as an offer to assist her to her feet, but she shunned it and found her footing on her own.

Kogliastro shone one last disappointed glance in Warrel’s direction before drifting away and leading them through the mist once more.

Many, many footfalls passed with nary a word spoken among them.

Warrel walked with his head down. He wondered if either of his companions would now be at all truly concerned about his welfare, or if he would have to fend for himself. Self-preservation demanded he do something to put himself back in their graces.

But what?

Regrets immediately came to mind. He pondered his decision to pass up the gig the manager of the theatre in Ravenswood had offered him for tomorrow night. ‘*Our doors will be wide open,*’ the manager had proudly said. ‘*For on occasion I like to provide amusement for the less fortunate among our populace. A performance by the renowned Warrel the Suave, no matter how brief, is a luxury that would captivate them for years to come.*’ And Warrel had answered, ‘*Warrel the Suave does not cater to peasants.*’ And though Kogliastro offered to delay his journey for the occasion, even willing to shell coin from his own purse to finance overnight lodgings for Grumli, Warrel dismissed the notion with a wave of his hand and told him, ‘*Nay! The road beckons ever onward!*’

He sighed and felt for his mandolin, which was usually always connected to his body in one way or another. But it was gone now, of course. And what was a minstrel without his instrument?

The air around him grew even darker and the mist even thicker. The landscape changed back to grass and weeds and scatterings of sorry-looking trees. All was simply too quiet, Warrel knew. There had been frogs and toads hopping about before, but now they were gone. There was nary a bird or beast to add resonant flavor to the atmosphere, not even hooting owls. At that moment he would even have settled for

some nocturnal goblin raiding party gibbering and gabbering in their hissing tongue about how they were going to rob the trio blind and leave no survivors.

But there was nothing, only dead silence and the approaching darkness.

And then somewhere in the haze, Warrel could have sworn he heard the sounds of rustling weeds, followed a moment later by a twig snapping. He placed his index finger behind his ear and listened closely, dismissing any sounds caused by the agile bootfalls of the cleric or the softly fluttering robe of the wizard.

He heard slow, shuffling footsteps that definitely did not belong to him or his companions. They emanated from his left, and he appraised the source of the noise was not but twenty feet away, unseen in the mist.

Undeniably, they were not alone.

“Kogliastro,” he called out, as softly as he was able, his voice unintentionally wavering. “I believe I hear them... the undead the cleric spoke of.”

“Yes, I know,” Kogliastro called back, with unnerving calm. “They’ve been coming at us for a while now, from all directions.”

Warrel gulped. Even Arika looked back long enough to show him a dismayed glance.

He whispered up to her, “How many assaulted your company?”

“Their numbers seemed infinitesimal,” she stated, the blunt tone of her voice denoting absolute truth.

Warrel’s stride stuttered.

He knew total darkness was coming. Because of the mist, there would be no moon to provide them even the most nominal amount of light. Pitch black would soon devour them, figuratively, and then they would be devoured, literally.

And if I survive this nightmare, Warrel pondered, I can write one nine-hells of a song about the dangers of metaphor.

“Keep moving, keep moving,” Kogliastro said, his pace quickening. “We are almost there.”

“Almost *where*?” Arika asked.

“The magical place,” he answered.

They continued walking, the wizard in the lead, followed by the cleric and the minstrel. More and more shuffling feet could be heard in their perimeter.

Teeth clacked together.

Then there were gaspless snarls. Most of them sounded as though they could have been formerly human, though there were a few bestial murmurs Warrel couldn't quite identify just yet.

With unspoken agreement, the trio's walk turned into a jog, the jog into a run, and the run into a sprint.

Bursting out of the mist, many undead hands reached for them, the thrusts of their outstretched fingers accompanied by breathless moans. Slippery, slimy earthworms dripped from holes of decay. Maggots slithered over rotted fingernails. Scampering centipedes crawled in and out of idle nostrils. The stench of death permeated the watery air—and when Warrel breathed that air, the stench was palpable and even left a nasty taste on his tongue.

He nearly gagged.

He caught up with Arika. A gray hand darted out of the fog and clasped her on the shoulder. She swiped the dead fingers from her clothing and continued running.

Warrel's faster sprint caused her to speed up as well and soon they were alongside Kogliastro. The three of them ran together, fearing that the opacity of the mist and the swiftness with which they scurried through it would result in nothing more than being delivered directly into an entire mob of hungry undead arms.

Warrel was breathing with an open mouth. Sweat pooled from his forehead and strands of his greasy hair clung to his face.

And then in an instant Kogliastro's foot met with the root of a tree jutting from the earth and he took a spill, his walking stick flying loose from his grasp and whirling through the air, his cowl slipping back from his head and his robe fluttering like a flag caught in a hard wind. He went down face first and slid on his stomach for several feet, carried along by his momentum.

There was a telltale snapping sound in his elbow.

Warrel and Arika's own momentum carried them past the fallen wizard for a brief instant, until they turned on their heels and ran back.

"Not yet, old man," Warrel gritted, yanking Kogliastro to his feet, his head all the while darting to and fro in a panic as the blinding mist on all sides of them danced around shadowy apparitions. *"It's early in the tale yet, and this is only a side quest. You can't die here."*

Or we ALL die here, he wanted to add.

Kogliastro looked up at him and for the first time since he had known him, Warrel saw his full face unobstructed. It turned out the old man he had been traveling with was indeed old; his skin was flaking and wrinkled and shadowed with splotches of discoloration. Dirt and grass were tangled in his long beard and he was bleeding from several small cuts. His eyes blinked rapidly. This grandfather was several generations grand.

And, pitifully, he looked beyond frail. Warrel wondered if he had always looked this way, or if the magic that sustained him in old age was fading in this cursed land, as Arika had warned him it would.

“Get him up! Get him moving!” Arika shouted, drawing her sacred mace. She swiped futilely at several shadows emerging from the mist. In the wake of every swing, the enchanted diamond head left behind residual tracers in the air. However, there was no sense of depth perception in the fog and it seemed impossible to discern how close or how far her adversaries were.

The shadows did not dodge, parry, or retreat. They only vigilantly kept coming forward.

And then several undead bodies emerged from the mist and into their view.

Former humans, Warrel saw. And another ogre. And kobolds, even.

—All manner of undead things, all attempting to encircle the two adventurers clustered against the wounded wizard.

“You must clear a path,” Kogliastro uttered, cringing. “We are so close... *so close.*”

Warrel’s hands fumbled until he was able to locate and unslung his crossbow from his back. He whirled in a panic, once again finding the shadow of the undead ogre.

It looked much like the first one they had encountered —the one that got Grumli —all dirty and decaying, except this one carried no club and its left arm was nearly gone from its socket, clinging only by a narrow thread of rotting sinew. It dangled back and forth like a grotesque pendulum. And when the body got closer, Warrel noticed that its wormy entrails were peeking out of rotted holes in its midsection. It had been dead for a long time.

He snuggled the stock of the crossbow firmly against his shoulder. The solid silver contraption felt nearly weightless in his hands and somehow graceful. He peered out over the sight, centering it on the ogre’s chest.

And when he pulled the trigger, all he wanted to do was cry.

He had never intended to actually *use* the crossbow —*ever*. Just like less famous bards, Warrel followed the common practice of placing his wealth in magical items and rare antiquities that could be carried more easily than a heavy purse full of thousands of gold pieces. Thusly, he purchased the crossbow from a prominent gnomish professor by the name of Nimbo, who was a disciple of *Baldurathal*, the God of Science, Imagination, Creativity, and Inventions. Warrel never dared disassemble it to see how its mechanisms operated. Merely *owning* it was enough.

And when the trigger was pulled, there was no reflexive jolt—no equal and opposite reaction. The Bolt of Blunting sprung from the string and darted straight and true, colliding squarely with the dead ogre’s ribcage.

All at once the ogre exploded outward in bloody pieces, its head propelled upward with the same velocity as a festival firework, the severed spine trailing behind like a macabre prehensile tail. Its mammoth arms and legs burst from the torso and popped in every direction. The widowed torso was carried along with the ever-onward Bolt of Blunting, their destinies intertwined. Every last bit of the ogre disappeared somewhere in the mist.

Arika jerked her head in Warrel’s direction, her jaw hanging limp.

Bolts of Blunting. Each one of the rather modestly named artifacts was said to possess the brute force of a hundred dwarven warhammers. Professor Nimbo claimed to have manufactured only six of them in his entire lifetime, and Warrel had purchased them all.

His thumb pressed a button at the end of the crossbow and the string drew back with nary a labored pull. With a *clicker-clack*, a mechanism inside the contraption delivered a second Bolt of Blunting from the chamber and situated it upon the shaft, pressed snugly against the bowstring and ready to fire, mere seconds after the first bolt was launched.

“Warrel!” Kogliastro grunted, pointing behind him with a crooked finger. “We must go *that* direction.”

Warrel turned and faced a line of shadows emerging from the mist, some humans and what looked to be a goblin. They all walked with unsteady gaits, upper limbs outstretched with lustful appetite. They would claw, they would tear, and they would bite.

He raised his crossbow at them.

'Tis only money, he told himself. If you play five shows a week for five years, you can earn it all back... Or just pick a lot of pampered pockets.

Nevertheless, despite his mental reassurances, Warrel cringed each and every time a Bolt of Blunting was expended, until every last one of them was gone.

The bodies in the undead line blocking their path exploded in turn, spraying gruesome gunk in every direction. Arika tried turning her head to avoid the shower but she wasn't fast enough. Bits and pieces of dead things slapped her face, some of it clinging. She hurriedly picked them off with panicked fingers, wincing in disgust.

Blood and body parts rained down from above. Warrel hunkered down and covered his head, but it wasn't enough to absorb the impact of a goblin's disfigured skull from bouncing off of his.

He muttered, "*Ouch.*"

The other undead bodies maneuvered themselves in an attempt to close the gap Warrel had created, but Warrel tugged Kogliastro along by the arm and rushed through the opening before the circle of dead things had them fully surrounded again. Arika followed closely behind.

"We... are almost there," Kogliastro panted.

Almost where? Warrel wanted to know.

They dashed away from the throng of undead creatures, Warrel and Arika keeping the wizard between them, holding his hands and forcing him to keep pace. Even when he would stumble they made certain he stayed upright. But as they crested the rise of a hillock, Warrel suddenly stopped, his hand jerking Kogliastro to a halt and then, in turn, Arika. He turned to study the direction they had already traveled.

"What are you doing?!" Arika screamed.

"*The crossbow,*" Warrel muttered. "I lost the damned crossbow."

"Pay it no heed! We must be off —*now!*"

She tugged on Kogliastro, who, in turn, tugged on Warrel.

Warrel hesitated, shaking his head and releasing a deep exhale.

They continued running.

It seemed as though they had outran most of their undead pursuers, though swaying shadows still lingered in the mist. Once the first hillock was cleared, there was another, and then another. The land had turned from grassy plains to mounds that rose and fell, hillock after hillock. The ache in Warrel's legs intensified.

At last something emerged all at once before them, and Warrel had but an instant to stop running before slamming into it face first. His feet skidded to a halt.

“Here is what we have been seeking,” Kogliastro mumbled, huffing and puffing. He was nearly doubled over as he clutched his stomach and tried desperately to catch his breath. The hand not clutching his stomach clutched the forearm from where they had heard the snap when he fell. It was obvious he was trying to disguise the greater pain in his elbow with his lesser pain from shortness of breath.

Yet Warrel wasn’t paying attention to that.

He was staring at what once had been a structure of some sort, but was now nothing more than dilapidated brick and mortar pillars, crumbling and decaying from the slow wear of time. The area was littered with broken boards and rusted nails, shattered blocks and cracked flagstones. Petrified lumber lay crossways in haphazard piles.

The mist circled and wafted and undulated through the ruins, singing an eerily hollow tune, while shards of blackened wood strewn about seemed to suggest that the construction was originally destroyed by fire.

“A house, perhaps?” Arika thought aloud. “Or was, in the least.”

Though the darkness was blotting out nearly everything that wasn’t within an arm’s reach, Warrel was able to squint his eyes and perceive that the two pillars on either side of him rose up and joined in a semicircle above his head. Further inspection of the left pillar revealed three rusted hinges in telling intervals on its inner face. The door they were once attached to, however, was long missing.

They were obviously standing directly in front of what had once been the main entrance.

“Something is... *off*,” Arika said, probing through the void with her mace.

Warrel snapped his head toward Kogliastro and growled, “But it is just a pile of rubble, wizard. This is what we have been traveling so far to see?”

“*Patience*,” Kogliastro replied.

A cacophony of undead howls rose up from behind them, stinging Warrel’s sensitive human ears and causing him to cringe. The howls were soon accompanied by a myriad of shuffling footsteps that were gradually growing louder.

Their pursuers were catching up.

“We haven’t *time* for patience,” Warrel said.

“*Repolverey*,” Kogliastro replied.

Warrel took a step back as the wizard lifted his robed arm and stretched his hand out into the mist. He then turned to face the direction they had already traveled.

There was a *whooshing* sound and in the next instant the walking stick Kogliastro had misplaced in his tumble was back in his hand and he was gripping it so tightly it seemed they had never been parted. If Warrel had blinked, he would have missed it.

But that would only be his first trick.

Kogliastro extended the staff back into the mist.

The pupils of his eyes clouded over into whiteness. Then his stringy white hair and beard began to flutter in a breeze that did not exist. He opened his mouth wide, and a deep, resounding guttural chant issued forth: “*Tempre... pyro... inferno... Ignite!*”

The bulbous point at the end of the staff set itself ablaze. And though the born flames grew to the length of a giant’s fist, they did not consume a staff that seemed to be fashioned purely of wood.

The fire licked away at the watery air and the mist itself seemed to shrink from the flame as though it were alive and frightened of the much more powerful element.

Arika’s astonished eyes grew wide. Warrel could now clearly see her and Kogliastro’s faces, glowing with an orangish tint. It was slightly comforting.

“And you are just now conjuring this fire?” Warrel groaned. “Why didn’t—”

“—For surely they are drawn to it,” Kogliastro answered. “Yet they fear the burn.”

Undead cries circled around them yet again, scream upon scream upon scream. Flickering silhouettes flashed against the darkness in their perimeter. Slimy gray hands emerged from the mist.

Kogliastro took a step forward and lifted his fiery staff vertically above his head, both hands gripping it ferociously, and then all at once brought it down and stabbed its bottom point into the earth. It sunk in several inches, and when Kogliastro let go and stepped away, the staff remained steady. It had become a beacon of flame between them and the shadows.

He said, “This will help you hold them back.”

“Hold them back?” Warrel asked.

“For just a few moments.”

Warrel felt his jaw drop as a humanoid figure with an unsteady gait slipped out of the mist in front of him. It was big, standing at least two heads taller than himself.

—And he looked familiar somehow.

Kogliastro turned away and once again faced the ruins. He lifted his robed arms into the air and began chanting words that Warrel didn’t even know existed.

“Warrel!” Arika called.

Warrel jerked his head to face her.

“You must assist me in fighting them back,” she said, staring intently into the perilous mist. She assumed a fighting stance with her mace reeled back and ready to swing. “We must give the wizard time to cast... whatever he is casting.” She quickly glanced behind her at the wizard, then faced the oncoming mob again.

Warrel replied, “’Tis a job for Warrel the Suave.” He pulled open his cloak with his left hand while his right reached inside for the hilt of his silver rapier. He drew it with best bravado he could muster. The blade made satisfying whishing sounds as it sliced through the air and placed *en garde*. “You just be certain your mace swings out of range of my skull.”

“And likewise with your sword.”

He nodded.

Behind him, Kogliastro was aglow in magical energies, electricity swirling and cascading over the length of his body. The ground below him trembled.

In front, the shadows lurched closer. In the vanguard was the big humanoid figure Warrel had noticed earlier, and when the figure emerged into the full radiance of the flame, and Warrel noticed the distinct engraved belt buckle depicting an eagle in mortal combat with a lion, he knew at once who the figure was: Olaf the Barbarian, slayer of the great dragon Daviokus, missing and assumed deceased for thirty years or more. Warrel had studied the famous hero from lorebooks.

And now the shell of the great warrior was approaching, tattered remnants of furry armor dangling off his chiseled torso, arms outstretched, mouth open and tongue salivating, teeth rotted yet ready to bite. And when Warrel looked into Olaf’s eyes, he saw nothing there —no cognizance, no spark. Only emptiness.

Thrice-damned zombies, he thought, gritting his teeth.

He had encountered zombies once before, in a haunted dungeon below the city of One Vale, but that was a tale five years past. Those zombies were few and were merely minions of a fledgling necromancer. The adventurer Warrel was accompanying destroyed them and their master, and Warrel wrote a song about it. (The tune wasn't one of his greatest compositions, but it made for a satisfactory opening ballad.) Never before had Warrel encountered zombies that roamed so freely and so numerous on a land they could very well claim as their own, nor had he even heard tale of it.

Nevertheless, if these zombies were anything like the others, then he knew the only ways to stop them for certain was to dismember them, (he longed to have his crossbow once more,) or beat the head into submission with extraordinary weapons, such as his silver rapier enchanted by Kogliastro or Arika's mace blessed by her goddess. Yet even better than that: disintegration.

Ergo, fire.

"Let them come to us," Arika told him. "The wizard's flame will divide them."

Warrel glanced over at her. Her lips were pursed, her hair was tucked out of the way behind her pointed ears, and her palms were rubbing hard on her mace's handle, sinking in a firm grip. She seemed a fairly capable warrior, which was something of a relief.

Dozens of zombies had emerged from the shadowy mist, but when those between Warrel and Arika came too close to the wizard's flame, they brought up their arms to protect their faces and then covered backwards, horrid screeches filling the air and causing a ruckus with the zombies behind them. The undead to the immediate left of Warrel and to the right of Arika, however, approached freely, the flame too far away to suffer its heat and frighten them off.

As luck would have it, the first zombie to approach Warrel was the erstwhile Olaf the Barbarian.

Warrel thrust with his rapier, and Olaf's cumbersome, uncoordinated arms failed to deflect the blow. The point of the rapier penetrated Olaf's right eye socket and sunk in deep. Gross green and black stuff oozed down the surface of the silver blade and dripped from the hilt.

Olaf kept coming, so Warrel stabbed again, this strike going up Olaf's leftmost nostril, then cutting its way into the right, and then severing

Olaf's nose completely. More green and black stuff spilled out of the cavity, along with a writhing mass of crawly maggots. They hit the ground with a splash.

Olaf continued pressing forward.

Warrel realized that thrusting techniques were not going to be effective enough, so he started slashing. He sent his first stroke across Olaf's forehead, and then his second one through the neck and spine.

Olaf the Barbarian's head slipped cleanly from its shoulders, bounced off the ground and ricocheted off Warrel's boot, kicked around by the shuffling feet of the dozens more undead approaching, then rolled down the hillock and disappeared in the mist. The body itself slumped to the ground. More liquid splattered from the gaping hole above the shoulders.

Warrel's battlecry was a macho, "*Wuahahaha!*"

He briefly flicked his attention to Arika to see if she had witnessed his manliness, but was slightly dismayed at what he saw. There were already four carcasses at the cleric's feet—a kobold, a wood elf, and two former humans—and all of them had their heads caved in, tongues dangling. When the next zombie got too close to her, she bashed its head in with her mace. It was still twitching after it went down, so she slammed it two more times, first on one ear then the other.

Her battlecry was a trilling, "*Heeya!*"

Warrel turned back to his side of the wizard's flame, somewhat humbled, and immediately decapitated the first undead kobold to get too near.

Never did like the little dog-faced gremlins anyway, he mused.

When he looked up again and was able to view the undead faces by torchlight, he was shocked to discover that he recognized some of the walking corpses, either by his own experience or by the tales of their deeds.

One was undeniably Yancy the Dark Priestess—a bitch of a witch. Her tale told that she escaped the supposed inescapable fortress prison of Akweela only to never be heard from again. Another was Tyvark the Archer, who won the prestigious Queen's Cup competition, only to disappear a month later. It had always been assumed he was murdered by jealous rivals. Another was Von the Noble, who was exactly that. He had disappeared at sea. And yet another was Roland the Wayfarer, a famous bard from the other side of the world.

Warrel quickly singled him out, swiping off his head with a single stroke.

“*Apologies all around, chum,*” he sang. “*’Twas just friendly rivalry.*”

“Fool!” Arika screamed, sweating as she heaved her mace back and forth, squishing two skulls on each swing. “This is not a game! You make quips when there is evil afoot!”

Warrel swiped at the two outstretched arms approaching him, hacking them off in turn, then decapitating their owner. He retreated back to the light of the wizard’s flame, hoping the advance of undead would thin out before they reached him.

He called over to Arika, “Oh, sweetness, by all means convince me you’re not having jollies over there denting skulls!”

“These are the tasks my goddess commands be done! This land is sour and is an abomination to all that I stand for!”

“As you please.”

Warrel watched three shambling elves come closer. They shied from the flame and sidestepped in his direction, snarling in unison. He prepared to swing his blade, concentrating on decapitating all three of them at once.

Then he felt a subtle tug on his bootstrings. He glanced down, and wasn’t too wholly surprised at what he saw: an undead woodland brownie. They were the smallest of the humanoid races, standing not eight inches tall, and this, like all the warriors of its race, (and Warrel used the term ‘warriors’ very loosely, because the entire species was quite laughable,) had its camouflage tattooed into its skin. The rest of it, however, was ensanguined from its tiny matted hair to its tiny sandaled feet. It had its arms wrapped around Warrel’s boot and was gnawing on the string. It looked like an insane man hugging a tree —while being watched from very far away, of course.

Warrel lifted his leg and shook the undead brownie loose. When the brownie hit the ground, Warrel squished him underfoot. There was a pleasant-sounding *crunch*, the sound of miniscule bones breaking, and Warrel was quite pleased with himself. He felt he had accomplished something utterly magnificent.

But when he looked up again, six undead elven hands put firm grips on his cloak. He felt himself being yanked forward, away from the protection of the wizard’s flame and into certain death. His feet slipped beneath him and he scrambled to maintain his balance, nearly tripping over Olaf’s headless carcass.

He swung wildly with the rapier while he used his left hand to unclasp

the cloak from his neck. He spun around and the cloak came free, sending his undead assailants jostling backwards.

It occurred to him that he should have set the cloak on fire from the very start and tossed it into the crowd. It least then its loss would have had some purpose.

Too little, too late, he lamented.

Behind him, Kogliastro's entranced chants grew audible. "*Deeyo, deeteekie, kee-ato! I command thee, dispel this illusion away from me, and let mine eyes see what really be!*"

Warrel went, "Eh?" and turned around.

The ruins were no longer ruins. Standing before him was an elegant noble's villa, not quite a manor, two stories tall and absolutely pristine, right down to the oaken door equipped with a big brass knocker.

"The ruins were merely an illusion," Arika gasped.

But Warrel was not awed. He was irked. He stammered, "Who would dare hide this sanctuary from us?!"

"Let us find out," Kogliastro replied.

He lifted his old man's hands to the curved door handle and pulled the door open. It swung freely on its hinges as though it were constructed only yesterday. He was immediately bathed in light that emanated from inside.

"Wizard!" Arika called out, pointing. "Your staff—"

"Leave it. So long as it burns they will not approach the door."

"And how long will that be?" Warrel asked.

Kogliastro did not answer, but instead took the first step through the threshold.

*I hope you've enjoyed the story
so far. There is more to come.
(And yes, there will be draw.)*

— Travis