

TOGETHER

a short story by J. Nelson Leith
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Believe it or not, we all met in a tavern. I know that's a villager myth that nobody really believes. A group of ne'er-do-wells and trouble-makers meet up in a tavern and share rumors about some grand adventure. You know the trifecta: *saving the kingdom, defeating an ancient evil, retrieving an item of inestimable value*. Such storybook bullshit.

But, it really happened. You can chuckle at that if you want, but don't dare do it in my presence unless you like gumming your dinner.

I was just sitting there, in a corner of the tavern, trying to look dark and dangerous and moody. Wanting to be left alone. Working out my own matters.

That's what my type does. I'm a tracker, a ranger, an inquisitor. Not a church inquisitor or a royal inquisitor, although I've done both. I'm in independent practice now. I look into things, around town, on the roads, in the wilderness. For whomever has coin. Preferably the better sort of coin, with a clear stamp of some familiar monarch depicted significantly more attractive than real life. Which, given the royal propensity to incest and its consequences, is a feat for which the minters deserve a festival.

At the time, I had just enough coin in my purse from recent missions to justify sitting in the corner looking dark and dangerous and moody. And unapproachable. A few more expensive drinks, though, and I'd have to adjust my demeanor for marketing purposes.

Despite my theatrically off-putting look, a wizard sat down at my table.

I didn't deduce it at the time—I'm not *that* good of an inquisitor—but he was a real wizard. Not a common hand trickster with doves enslaved in his sleeves, but an honest-to-magic wizard, with books and everything. He didn't have a beard, but I swear on my third testicle he was a real wizard. You can chuckle at that in my presence if you want; I'm over it. I've got an extra testicle I can swear on with impunity, and you probably don't. Freak's advantage.

This is the point where the teller of the tale normally says that he's getting ahead of himself. But, I'm getting *behind* myself. I know, it's a neat trick. Let me move ahead a bit.

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The ne'er-do-wells and I, we were *saving the kingdom by retrieving an item of inestimable value by defeating the ancient evil* who stole it. The full fable.

The kingdom being saved wasn't my kingdom, but it was a kingdom that paid. It wasn't the wizard's kingdom either, because real wizards don't respect borders. They're a bit uppity like that.

The wizard wasn't in it for the coin like me, though. He just wanted to study *the item of inestimable value* before we had to turn it over to the *kingdom to be saved* after defeating *the ancient evil*.

In full disclosure, the item was made up of several items, arcs of iron and gold and silver and copper, sanctified to the patron gods of various minor kingdoms that had been consolidated by strategic marriages into the grand kingdom that hired us. Marriage is a wonderful thing, if you've got a throne or two to pass down. Each marriage in that consolidation linked up a couple of those sacred arcs, two royal brats becoming one flesh as two priesthoods became one priesthood until finally the entire Circle of the Covenant was united under a single royal spawn under a single royal cult under a single God of gods.

Which was all dandy until *the item of inestimable value* was stolen from the Royal Temple by *an ancient evil*, the Giant King.

Now, giants in general have a reputation for being laughably dumb. All the storybooks confirm this. It's not undeserved. Most of them end their days at the hands of backwoods shepherds avenging thefts (or rapes!) of their sheep with nothing more than slings. Occasionally, it's goatherds, which is even more humiliating. Goatherds are the lowest of the low, despite their delightful cheeses. And lamb kabobs. So delicious. But goatherds? If you're put in the grave by a goatherd with a sling and a rock, you deserved it.

But, the Giant King was another creature altogether. For one thing, most giants were known by their names or sobriquets. Nog or Balguz or Featherbeard or Goatmate. The Giant King was just the Giant King. He must have had a name, but I'd never heard it.

And, he wasn't some lone giant hermit eating (or raping!) sheep and goats. He led a formidable brigade of giants from deep in the Blueblack Mountains, far from the temptations of pastoral society. When his forces thundered south from those mountains, the grand kingdom was utterly unprepared. They were too busy arranging noble marriages, noble weddings, noble baby showers, and other such frivolities. The capital was stormed, the Royal Temple desecrated, and the Circle of the Covenant stolen.

That's when the phrase "everything went south" entered the lexicon. I actually like that phrase as a useful addition to the language, because after the giants came south from the Blueblacks and stole the Circle, everything went south in the kingdom. Old families ties were tested. The Royal Couple started bickering and cheating on each other, often with cousins a little too close for priestly comfort. The various local priesthoods started debating whose god was the real God. Knightly orders, originating in local cults, started getting into drunken brawls in the most inconvenient places, like brothels, and nunneries qua brothels. And, monasteries qua brothels.

Without the Circle to keep everything on a proper orbit, the grand kingdom went spinning wild.

Again, this wasn't my kingdom. I'm from Villagrandamereshire, pronounced *veegramsher* for some fucking reason. It's a tiny, ridiculous kingdom up in the maritime mountains of the west where shepherds and goatherds are actually esteemed members of society. And, their herds are all-too-often herds qua brothels. There are no giants there, so the damage is kept to a minimum. But, it's still foul.

The grand kingdom that hired us to save it was the *Scheissenreich*. You might have known that if you knew anything about the Circle of the Covenant. Or not. Read a fucking book. Preferably not a storybook.

So, to bring this around, we tracked the Giant King into the Blueblack mountains and knocked on the stone door to his cavern. It was really that prosaic.

I did the tracking through the woods and meadows and towns of the northern Scheissenreich, as that was my job. It wasn't hard. Giants leave a brutal trail. Lots of crushed crops, crushed fences, and crushed townsfolk.

To be fair, the townsfolk who had not been crushed helped a bit. On the northern outskirts of a town, I sometimes lost the trail. But, there was always someone who had seen where the giants had gone.

"Old Jam was just standing out in his field, holding his hoe, when the giants came through and stomped him. Then they stomped off that way."

This was a typical tale.

"They kneed their way through the barn and marched that way as the cows ran off in all directions."

That was another typical tale.

"One of them bashed the well with a club, for no reason at all, and they walked off that way."

You get the idea.

Occasionally, I had to weather tales of local heroism, all of them ending pretty much the same way.

"Big Tam, his father was sheriff but Tam himself was too dull for the office, he tried to turn them giants from the town with a lance, but one of them sent him into the barley fields with a swift kick and they stomped the town to pieces."

That was the tale of Cribridge.

"The men of the village armed themselves with pitch-forks and rushed the giants, but then stopped short and ran off into the woods."

That was the tale of Yaxton.

"Sir Jillahooly had a ditch filled with wood and set aflame to keep the giants from town. They went around it into the fields and tossed stones into town and knocked all of the buildings down. Sir Jillahooly got crushed when a giant threw an uprooted maple at him."

This sort of thing went on until the towns and villages faded away and I had to track the giants through the wilds north of the Scheissenreich.

The wizard located the door once my tracking failed in a dry and rocky gully deep in the mountains, just above a waterfall (which was a real pain in the arse to get past) and off to the side, away from the main stream. There were stark crags and hardy evergreens on every side, overhung by thin mountain clouds and backed by the cool mist and roar of the foss. It would've been a beautiful, if strenuous hike had we not brought murder along as our agenda.

The door was magically hidden, as giant and goblin and dwarf doors often are. But, once the wizard did his job finding the door, mumbling some archaic words from a forgotten language—I told you he was a real wizard—we all took our places and that idiot Ed did the knocking.

Forsooth, you don't know who Ed is. Now I'm getting *ahead* of myself. Let me do what inquisitors often do, and backtrack a bit since I've lost the trail of the tale.

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This fucking wizard walked up to me in the tavern despite my best efforts to look unsociable. I have a feeling that, even if I had been reading a book with a hood over my head, he still would have sat down and cleared his throat. As it was, I was just looking gloomy and gripping the handle of a clay mug of mead like I wanted to crack someone across the chin with it. I doubt even a crack on the chin would have deterred him.

He sat down, grinned with his beardless face, took off his ostentatiously pointed wizard cap (it had fucking stars painted on it!), pushed his glasses up his nose, and lifted a finger for a server without looking over his shoulder. I just stared at him gloomily, trying to make him want to go away. It didn't work. The corset-bound server arrived, swished her red hair (which I noted, but the wizard did not), took the drink order, and sashayed away (which again I noted, but the wizard did not).

"You're Middel of *Vilgarmshire*," he mispronounced. "An inquisitor of great repute. You unmasked the conspirators of the Janoverian League. You uncovered the plot of the Aruk Horde. You cleared Lady Malindra of the charge of Poor Speech against her."

"*Veegramsher*," I corrected him. I lifted the mead to my mouth and sipped dramatically, staring grimly at him over the fired clay of the mug in a last-ditch effort to make him go away. That also did not work. He smiled at my correction, as if he took great joy in the trivia of dialect.

"I haven't had the opportunity to familiarize myself with the lands or the speech of the west."

He glanced over his shoulder. Out of professional habit, I tracked his focus. He looked to the server, at her auburn-framed face rather than her considerable arse and chest. Then, his eyes darted toward a black-clad girl mirroring my gloomy presentation in the opposite corner of the tavern. Then, a quick look toward a gray-robed lady standing uncomfortably near the fireplace, vaguely admiring the plates and vases atop the mantle. Then, a bare peek at a lanky fellow sitting slack-jawed and drooling at the bar.

"Your western dialects are fascinating," he said, spreading his clearly manicured fingers against the table.

I set the mug on the table, did a quick calculation of the coin I had left, and decided to be blunt.

"You're annoying the piss out of me."

He lifted his hands and shrugged.

"Hold off your doubts. I know your reputation. You do not know mine."

I had to grant him that point.

"Enlighten me."

He looked left and right, theatrically, at nobody. Then, he adjusted his glasses, for no reason. All of that only annoyed the piss out of me more. Then, he gripped the edge of the table and leaned in.

"I am Birthday," he whispered. "A genuine wizard of the old tradition. Not a trickster who plays with delusions of the hand. A true student of the occult arts."

I blinked but otherwise remained still. That claim was a little too storybook for me. I found a frown in my drawer of dismissive expressions and offered it up to the wizard. At that moment, the server reached over his shoulder to put a glass of white wine on the table, her chest almost spilling out of her corset. The wizard barely noticed.

"I talk to angels and devils. I undo the magics of dwarves and elves. I study the yore prophecies and pagan oracles."

He lifted the glass for a toast. After I ignored the prompt, he nodded and took a sip.

"Here, let me show you something. You're drinking mead?"

"Is that your trick?" I huffed my skepticism. "Mead is a common mug drink. You had ale, cider, and beer as your alternatives."

"Mead, then." He grinned arrogantly and set his glass on the table. "Except, it's cider now."

I felt my eyelids drop. I looked at my drink. I lifted it to my mouth. By the fairies' nipples, it was cider that touched my tongue.

"Fucking what?"

He shrugged.

"I picked cider because it was the middle option you mentioned. And Middel is your name."

That's when I knew he was a real wizard. Turning mead to cider is a real feat, particularly to a tavern-hound like me.

"That was cute," I admitted. "What's your game?"

He drew himself up, lifted the wine to his smug face, and drank deep.

"I want to go get the Circle," he said.

"The Circle of the Covenant," I said.

"Of the Covenant," he said, giving each word a solemn emphasis.

"Stolen by the Giant King," I said. We were speaking in addenda.

"I have a commission from the Scheissenreich..."

He wiped his mouth with a star-painted purple sleeve.

"...to put a team together and recover the Circle. They'll pay us seventeen hundred gold Scheissenmarks upon delivery."

That was a shitload of coin. I could almost taste the endless meads on my cider-tainted tongue.

"How much of that is mine?"

"I have five partners. So seven in all. You get five shares, so half."

I could do the maths. "Five shares of a final eleven isn't quite half."

"I won't be taking a share myself. I just want to see the Circle and study it. Before we turn it in."

Alright, that made the maths work. "I see three partners here in the tavern."

He winked at me and adjusted his glasses. This also pissed me off, but only a little, considering the coin he was dangling in my face.

"You're *good*, inquisitor." He leaned back and nodded the others over. They came over. He gestured at them, one-by-one, as they took seats at what I had hoped would remain an empty table.

The wizard waved at the black-clad girl, who sneered at me with a black-smear on her mouth as she sat, squinted her black-rimmed eyes, and tucked her black hair behind her ears.

"This is Mary Sue Angel. She is an assassin from the Sheng Temple. Quite formidable."

He then pointed with three fingers at the gray-robed lady, who frowned and blinked at me with soft, hazel eyes. She didn't like me much, for some reason.

"This is Nurse Paul, an accomplished healer from the south."

He then nodded at the tall, lanky fellow, who nearly tripped over his chair before plopping himself clumsily into it.

"And, this is Edifice, a fierce soldier and veteran of the war against the Aruk Horde, which I believe you incited when you uncovered their plot."

That was a vicious war, indeed. I sized this Edifice up. He was absurdly tall and absurdly gangly, but looked as solid as a tree. His mouth was open, his blue eyes empty. Not the brightest ember in the hearth, I guessed. He grunted at me illegibly. Usually, the tank of a party was an intense, burly type. Edifice was dull but wiry. I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

Again, I did the maths. "There are two more, not here."

The wizard nodded.

"Our rogue is named Rader Ladron. He is otherwise occupied tonight."

"Of course, on both counts." Rader Ladron was a ridiculously typical rogue name. And not being present was a ridiculously typical rogue trope.

The wizard was unfazed by my sarcastic response, one of his possibly non-magical strengths. He had one more storybook archetype to reveal, the party's holy warrior. The annoying voice of morality who would question all of our decisions. The wizard did not disappoint.

"Our knight is Dame Caley, also a veteran of the Aruk War."

"Caley. That's a good, moral name." I was, again, being sarcastic.

"She's a daughter of the esteemed Watercastle family of the Scheissenreich."

"And, I assume she's also otherwise occupied. Busy with some unfinished quest?"

The wizard shrugged. "She'll meet us along the way."

I finished off my mug of once-mead, now-cider and glared at the company. Mary Sue glared back. Nurse Paul demured toward her pale knuckles. Edifice seemed prepared to drool onto the table, but he didn't. Birthday grinned solicitously. Oh, yeah. We were a rude bunch of antagonists pretending to be a party.

"You," I pointed at Birthday, "I will call you the wizard."

He nodded.

"You," I pointed at the tank, "I will call Ed."

He sniffed noisily.

"You," I pointed at the healer, "I will call the nurse."

She nodded with a hint of resentment.

"And you," I pointed at the killer, but my finger curled back on itself instinctively. "I will call Mary Sue."

She smirked at my discomfort.

"And you," Mary Sue said, "we shall call the tracker."

I shoved my empty mug toward the center of the table. I was taking on a job that would buy me many more mugs.

"The tracker. Fair enough. That's what I'm doing, I guess."

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So, getting back on track, as the tracker: Rader Ladron mysteriously showed up the next morning as we were saddling horses to set out. That was true to rogue form.

Nobody bothered to question how he knew where we'd be or when we'd be setting out. He asked me about my sword, and I wondered for a moment if he meant to steal it. After a little professional banter, I decided that he was just intensely interested in weaponry. He went on at length about the quality of the smiths who'd made each of his five daggers (which seemed an excessive number to me) and each dagger's special characteristics and how he'd killed various guards with them.

Mary Sue stood nearby, nodding appreciatively at Rader's semi-soliloquy. I didn't fail to notice that I couldn't locate a single weapon on her black-clad person, which was probably by design. She was an assassin, after all.

We set out from our town of origin, which I haven't mentioned because it is a shit-hole settlement called Fuxton in the Scheissenreich sub-kingdom of Banthusia, where nothing good ever happens. Therefore, logically, this current mission was probably not good. I might track the giants back to their lair, but we'd never get into that lair. Or, if we got into that lair, we'd never get past the giant brigade to confront the Giant King. Or, if we confronted the Giant King we'd never defeat him. Not this cast of losers. Or, if we defeated the Giant King, we'd never find where he'd hidden the Circle of the Covenant.

This job was fucking ridiculous. But, I cast that thought aside like a dog hair caught clinging to my jacket, my only goal being an endless mead refill of a comfortable mug. In solitude, no further need to entertain stupid offers from stupid wizards. I had to make it work, somehow.

As we rode north, through goatherd and shepherd fields, past farms of inbred peasants and woods haunted by boars and bandits too timid to challenge us, past towns and villages with sad tales of failed defense against the giants, I forced myself to familiarize myself with myself's party.

Birthday was as charming as a block of cheese aging, always going on about supernatural languages, elvish cuisine, and goblin perversions. He told me about having stolen books from the Library of Churling when he was an apprentice because he couldn't pay the check-out fees. He confessed to keeping an ill-gotten store of books in a rented room in Fuxton, mostly linguistic texts, cookbooks, and polemics against those atrocious goblins. Apparently, he had translated elvish recipes into the angelic and demonic tongues—for some reason—and had identified the reason goblins seem to enjoy mutilating cattle.

Nurse Paul was a mystery, never talking much except to mention that she'd seen horrible wounds during the war against the Aruk Horde, for which she seemed to indulge a grudge against me for inciting. That was disappointing, because her eyes were like warm spring rains after a cold, dry winter. I tried to explain to her that the Aruk plot was bound to cause trouble whether I exposed it or not, but she was stubborn, and the blood and bandages in her memory deflected even my most charming arguments.

Mary Sue only wanted to talk about how we'd approach the Giant King and, with any luck, slit his throat before he got a chance to talk. She took herself to be the leader of the group, despite the wizard's commission. To be frank, I was fine with that. She had enthusiasm.

Rader was quizzically silent, not even wanting to talk about my sword after we'd left Fuxton. I tried to engage him in conversations about whetting stones and smiths, but he had nothing to say. He listened attentively, but only petted his horse in response. Maybe he'd decided my sword wasn't worth stealing.

Dame Caley was waiting for us at a place called the Monastery of the Beetle, a weird foothills hermitage where the monks made pastries from bugs. I declined her multiple offers to sample the monks' weird wares.

The Dame wore a full suit of greasily shined armor and a cloak of some red-furred victim of the noble hunting tradition. Black hair framed green eyes in a pale face, like fir saplings pushing through snow on a moonlit night. Even disguised by armor, she struck a figure that would not at all interest young boys or older men. I attempted to engage her in banter as we set out from the monastery, but she seemed intent on restraining herself in service to either her knightly order or her family's reputation, neither of which I, as a private inquisitor with a history of mucking up politics, apparently measured up to.

So, we had our seven, as the wizard had promised. A tracker, a wizard, a tank, an assassin, a healer, a rogue, and a knight. A proper adventuring party.

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"Are you certain this is the place?" I asked, standing in the barren rocky gully, one turn off a waterfall and a more promising, pine-laden valley uphill. More promising, except that the rocky gully had giant prints in it, and the corpses of several shepherds who had been mummified by the winter cold only weeks before. Also, some dead sheep. I couldn't tell if they'd been raped.

Birthday rolled his eyes. I fucking hated him and his pretentious wizard ways.

"This is where the Scheissenreich indicated," he said. "And where you tracked the Giant King."

I glanced at Mary Sue, who seemed eager to get to throat-slitting. She glanced at me with a look that said she was already weary of me talking to the wizard.

"They *indicated*?" I said.

"Some shepherds gave them a rough description of where the door was."

"Escaped friends of these dead ones, I guess." I shook my head. "Why didn't you tell me beforehand?"

He shrugged.

"I wanted to compare your tracking to the Scheissenreich's intelligence, objectively. You were right. There's a hidden door right there."

He pointed at a nondescript region of the stone wall at the end of the gully.

I shared an oddly sympathetic look with Rader and surveyed the tracks again. They led right up to the wall where the wizard had indicated.

"Well, this is the place. I guess."

"Let's take up our positions," Mary Sue growled.

I glanced around. Everyone was looking at me to confirm Mary Sue. Of course. That's how parties work out. The one last and least interested in the mission often ends up the unwitting leader. I groaned and waved at Mary Sue. She beamed at my affirmation in a murderously gleeful way.

"Paul and Birthday," she said, "get behind that rock, so you can work your magics without much risk."

The nurse nodded eagerly and slipped behind the indicated boulder, tucking her soft, brown hair behind her ear. The wizard shuffled off, as if humiliated by his role.

"Rader and Middel," Mary Sue said, "either side of the door, to carry out stealth attacks."

That seemed about right.

"What about you?" I said.

She just glared at me. I withered from that, and looked toward Rader. He gestured with his head in resignation toward the right side of the door. I shrugged and trundled off that way as if I were dutifully off to the tax office. The rogue took up position on the left side of the door.

"Caley in the middle ground," Mary Sue said, "to present a strong target."

The Dame drew her ridiculously wide sword and took up a fighting stance in the middle of the gully, next to a frozen shepherd. She shoved the mummy aside casually.

"Me?" Ed grunted. He had a look on his face like he was debating whether to vomit or merely burp.

Mary Sue walked past me and started climbing the wall of rock. Clinging to the stone like a sponce, she turned and looked at Ed.

"You knock on the door once I'm in place."

"What place?"

Everybody sighed at that.

Mary Sue pointed at the shelf of rock above the door, but then shook her head. "I'll tell you."

"Yes, yes," Ed said, nodding so hard a bit of spittle flung from his slack lower lip.

The assassin clambered to a position above the door, glanced at me and Rader, then pointed at Ed.

"Go ahead, buddy."

Ed grinned stupidly and shuffled past Dame Caley. He stumbled to a halt in front of the door.

"Draw your mace first," Mary Sue said.

He frowned wetly and drew his mace. I looked past him to Rader, whose face was hard and whose hands were suddenly filled with daggers. I glanced at the boulder over which Nurse Paul and Birthday were peeking. I snuck a look at Caley, who was staring intently at the door. She had an admirable sense of purpose. Then, I looked back at Ed, who was standing and panting with his mace in hand.

I heard Mary Sue sigh.

"Now, Edifice. Knock on the door."

"Mrh," Ed slobbered and nodded. He held the mace out, then shook his head in confusion and put the weapon back at his side. Then, he lifted his free hand and knocked softly on the rock.

We all stood still for a moment. Then another moment.

"Knock," Mary Sue said to Ed, "harder."

"Yrh, yes," he said. He reached out gently with his free hand, then rapped his knuckles hard against the stone.

We all stood still for a moment, again. Then, there was a cracking sound.

I noticed the wizard stand up behind the boulder in the corner of my vision.

"I told you all there was a door!"

"Down!" Mary Sue barked, waving at him with the hand that wasn't suddenly holding a dagger. He complied with a grimace.

A dark line traced itself into the stone, creating a rough rectangle twice my height. The door thus circumscribed retreated into the mountain.

"Edifice," Mary Sue shouted, "take up beside Dame Caley!"

Ed stumbled backward to, as Mary Sue had indicated, take up a position beside the knight, nearly stumbling over the shepherd mummy. He kicked at it resentfully, but missed.

The stone door vanished into darkness... and we all just stood there, staring into that darkness for what seemed like a fortnight.

Rader whispered, "Is there—"

A thunderous roar shook the air around us.

"Who disturbs the Giant King?!"

Rader and I took a step back. Or, two steps total, since there were two of us.

A figure stepped out of the darkness, grimy and fur-clad, wielding an axe the size of Nurse Paul in one hand and a club as long as Ed was tall in the other. He growled and took us in, eyes darting this way and that. He was not impressed.

Two things. He did not glance over his shoulder and so he did not see Mary Sue. Also, everyone but Mary Sue looked like they were about to shit their pants. I had to prevent that, for all our pants' sakes.

"*This* is the Giant King?" I asked with a look toward the wizard hiding behind the rock.

Birthday rolled his eyes. He also started moving his hands in a wizardly way, and sighed with an air of frustration. Frustration must be the emotion that drove his magic.

The Giant King glared at me quizzically.

"I *am* the Giant King!"

"I'm just saying," I just said, "usually a king has a retinue of courtiers, you know, sub-bosses, who—"

"Shush," Birthday shushed me from behind his boulder.

As the Giant King pointed his axe alarmingly in my direction, I got a better look at him. He was a pinkish brown mess of wrinkles. The lumpy purple club he was dragging looked like a huge penis. I was struggling not to laugh. In terror.

"My name is," the giant roared in a deep voice that shook my ribs, "TITANUS!"

Rader giggled. I stifled a chuckle. Birthday laughed out loud and then said, "Fuck!" Apparently he'd lost his concentration on the spell he was casting.

I lowered my sword. "Your name is Tight... anus?"

The giant's shoulders slumped.

"Why are you saying it like that?" He roared: "I am TITANUS!"

Even Edifice laughed that time, but I doubt he got it.

I shoved my sword into its sheathe, dramatically.

"I'm just saying. You might pronounce the A soft, like Tit-AH-nus."

"That wouldn't help much," Rader smirked. The giant growled at him over one shoulder.

"We were sent by the Scheissenreich," Birthday shouted, his hands moving, "to defeat you and retrieve the Circle of the Covenant!"

"Damn it." I shook my head. "He doesn't need to know that."

Titanus spasmed in laughter. I apologize for that image.

"The Circle is the least of my treasures! You are on a fool's errand."

"So," said Paul, peeking over the rock and rubbing her chin. "What is the greatest of your treasures?"

Titanus shivered as the thrust was yanked out of him.

"The greatest?" He puckered, reaching deep inside, as if feeling hollow. He leaned on the phallic club.

"If I had to choose what would leave me feeling most empty—" okay, I am paraphrasing him here "—it would have to be the Glass Armadillidium."

"The what?" Rader said.

"That's a pillbug," Birthday said, his hands shivering in anticipation. "*Armadillidium*. A woodlouse."

"Arm-a-dildo?" said Rader. I was suddenly so glad we'd brought him.

Titanus quivered. "It's an ancient relic of an insectoid cult!"

"Actually," Birthday said, pushing his glasses up his nose, "woodlice are crustaceans, not insects."

Titanus was done talking. He dragged his phallic club along the ground and lifted it over his head. I saw Edifice moving forward, and thought this was probably a bad thing. As it turned out, I was right.

Titanus batted Ed into the gully wall with one swing of the dildo-club. A little blood sprayed from his head, and lots of spittle from his mouth.

Dame Caley rushed forward, black hair flying like a flag behind her. Mary Sue looked like she was calculating the best way to leap onto the giant's back, and taking her sweet patience about it. I figured that was as good a time as any.

I chose a foot and took a step forward with it. As it turned it, it was the wrong foot, so I took another step before swinging my weapon. I knocked the cock-club from the giant's hand and rolled under the sweep of his axe.

Rader somehow managed to backstab the giant four times before being flung into the darkness beyond the secret door.

Dame Caley and the giant clashed weapons in a percussive staccato interlude, axe against sword, before he kicked the knight back into the gully to cuddle with a shepherd's mummy.

I saw Nurse Paul wiggling her magical nurse fingers at Caley as the giant turned his attention back to me. This resulted in a lot of sword-axe clanging and dark looks back and forth. He was tall, but not so good on the riposte. I kept myself alive handily.

This sparring was interrupted by a burst of purple flame, from Birthday I'm guessing. I ended up cuddling with a spruce tree against the wall of the gully, but that was better than clanging metal with Titanus. The giant was on his ass and elbows next to the door.

Ed was back on his feet, rushing at the Giant King with his mace wagging over his head. Some illegible syllable blurted from the soldier's gullet. With a single brutal swing, the giant's axe was knocked aside and his face was bashed in. The residual saliva from Ed's swing splatted against the giant's face.

Mary Sue leapt from her precipice and needlessly slit the dead giant's throat.

"Well," she said, "it looks like we did it."

Nurse Paul and Birthday emerged from their hiding place. She was wiggling fingers around, I guess healing each of us in turn. The wizard was just glaring at Mary Sue and shaking his head.

"That was too fucking easy," said Birthday. I hated him for being the voice of reason.

I removed myself from the tree. "I agree."

"It's not always like the storybooks," Mary Sue said.

"Even so," I said, "the Giant King was said to command an entire brigade. He had lieutenants. Where the fuck are all the sub-bosses?"

A still, small voice came from the darkness of the tunnel: "You guys are going to want to see this."

"Rader?" I shouted.

"Yeah, it's me."

"You're in the cave?" Mary Sue said.

"Yeah," he said, "the giant threw me in here."

"Mrh," said Ed.

"Hey," said Rader, "how about you all just come in here and see what I'm talking about."

That seemed reasonable. I glanced at Caley, who nodded reluctantly, and pointedly avoided making eye contact with Mary Sue. I stepped into the giant tunnel.

It was dark. Like, darker than a moonless night to a blindfolded man. But, at the far end of that darkness was a tiny star, like those that navigators might set their sextants on to guide them to prosperous shores. I set my eyes on it and put one foot in front of the other until I saw Rader holding that light, in the form of a torch, with all of his daggers neatly in their sheathes.

The chamber at the end of the tunnel was roughly circular. All around the periphery were giant skeletons, hideously contorted and draped in rotting flesh, congealed stains of blood and gore on the walls like some murderous painting.

"I guess he killed off the sub-bosses," I said.

Rader shrugged and nodded. "Yeah."

I heard the others stomp to a halt behind me.

"Damn," Caley said, probably violating some knightly oath against profanity.

"Shit," Mary Sue said.

"Oh my," said Birthday.

"Oh dear," said Nurse Paul.

"Ngh," said Edifice.

I felt the need to interject something into the non-conversation. "So, where's the Circle?"

Rader glanced over his shoulder at a doorway on the far side of the chamber. We exchanged tactical nods and headed in that direction.

The rear tunnel was dark, except for the light drifting over my shoulder from Rader's torch. Out of cynical instinct, I pointed my sword into the darkness.

That turned out to be pointless. Unlike in the storybooks, there was no surprise villain awaiting us. There was nothing but a big pile of treasure in the middle of a big domed chamber.

Birthday, of course, rushed to the Armadillidium. It was pretty, but not as pretty as he was acting. A pillbug-shaped lump of glass that glowed green from some unknown magic. Maybe magic is extra-beautiful to wizards. How would I know?

Mary Sue knelt before a glimmering silver dagger with a jade hilt. That made sense. Nurse Paul found a crumpled shelf of potions and began ecstatically stuffing them into her satchel. That also made sense.

Rader Ladron was just stomping around with a huge linen bag he'd clearly had had stuffed in some pocket. He was shoveling coins and weapons into it. This was noisy, but it also made sense.

Ed was standing in the doorway, eyebrows pinched together and looking like he had no idea what was going on, which also made sense.

I glanced at Dame Caley. She was not happy. She was the kind of not-happy that makes husbands blurt apologies without context. But, being the passable inquisitor that I was, I thought I knew the context. So, I spoke it.

"Where's the Circle?"

She turned toward me with her bottom lip looking like it had been stung by a wasp.

"Exactly."

I thought about it. Then, coming up empty, I thought about it some more. The wizard lifted the Armadillidium from the pile and an avalanche of coins and jewelry cascaded around his knees. Rader leaned in and started scooping the treasure into his bag.

I winked at Dame Caley. She didn't like it.

"I think I know."

I stepped up to the pile of treasure and waved the others off. They stepped back like kids being brushed away from a table full of cakes and candies. I plunged my hand into the pile, fished around a bit, and closed my fingers around something vaguely arc-shaped. I stepped back with a grin over my shoulder at the knight.

What came out of the treasure pile with my hand was a metal ring about two feet wide and three inches thick. It was divided into twelve equal arcs, three iron, three gold, three silver, and three copper. They were decorated in various ways, four with accents of onyx, four with accents of ivory, four with accents of ruby. There were no two alike.

"Now," Dame Caley said, "we can fulfill our mission with the Scheissenreich."

I glanced at the wizard, whose eyes leaked his desire to take as long as possible getting the Circle back to our employers, so he could study it. I glanced at Rader, who looked like he was checking his list of notorious fences who would offer us more for the Circle than the Scheissenreich would. I glanced at Ed, who looked like he couldn't decide whether to scratch his butt or scratch his crotch and had forgotten that he had two hands.

"Or," I said, holding a single finger in the air. Dame Caley sighed at me. "Hold on. *Or*, since the Scheissenreich is in such a mess right now..."

"Birthday," Caley said, "say something. We have a commission."

"Wait," I said.

"She's right," Nurse Paul said. "No more schemes."

"No schemes," I said, moving the Circle behind my back. "Just a realization."

Mary Sue juggled her fancy new dagger in one hand. "You need to be convincing in the next few moments."

Everyone nodded except Ed, who was scratching his butt and crotch simultaneously in a surprising display of coordination.

"I'll try."

I swung the Circle around in front of me and wrapped my hands around adjacent arcs. I pulled and the Circle popped apart in two places. I set one half on the ground and started separating the arcs in the half I still held.

"What are you doing?" Caley growled.

"Look, when they lost the Circle, the Scheissenreich started coming apart. Different interests. Different families, different gods. Different ideas of what's going on."

I finished dismantling the first half of the Circle and picked up the second half.

"Kind of like how we've all been during this entire mission. Each of us coming along for different reasons. That's not real unity."

All twelve of the arcs were now separated and scattered around my boots.

"I say we do ourselves a service and, at the same time, do the Scheissenreich a service, by selling each arc back to its original kingdom."

Rader snapped his fingers with a greedy grin that threatened to split his face. Dame Caley scowled at him.

"And by *selling*," I said, "I mean honoring our commission to the Scheissenreich, but bringing it down to the constituent kingdoms. Force them to work out their differences again on even ground."

"But what if they choose to fight?" Nurse Paul moaned.

I shrugged.

"Some may choose war, some may choose peace. This way, everyone will know who is who. And the peace-makers will join together and ultimately win. Peace will win."

Nurse Paul took a deep breath and nodded.

"And we'll make more money," Rader grinned.

"Yes," I said with an apologetic glance at Dame Caley. "But, that's not the main point."

"And," the wizard said, "I'll have more time with each of the arcs. You know, as we're traveling kingdom to kingdom."

"Yes," I said *slowly*, with another apologetic glance at Dame Caley, who now seemed mostly amused at me. "But, that's not the main point."

"The main point," said the knight, "is that each of us will get more out of the Circle, and the Scheissenreich will also get more out of the Circle."

"Exactly," I said. Caley and I were rowing in the same stream, for once. "Mary Sue will get more chances to slit throats as we distribute the arcs, Nurse Paul will get more chances to heal people. Ed will, you know, get more chances to be Ed."

"And you?" Caley asked. She seemed intensely intrigued by my gambit. "What does Middel of *Veegramsher* get?"

She pronounced it correctly!

"I get to be the good guy for once, making sure everyone else is getting what they really need."

Her snow-cloaked, mistletoe eyes were skeptical.

"Except for Titanus," I said. "He just got fucked."

Everyone laughed at that. Together.

THE END