The Wanderer's Tale

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Extract

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Vade-Mecum



VAAGENFJORD MAW. Tower of Darkness. Throne of Evil. Undercroft of the direst rawgr ever unleashed from the vile hands of Olchor.

'. . . Unholy Trinity of Darke Angels, Archangels
of Olchor, from Hell have been hurl'd;
Scathur the Herald, the Wolf from the Sea, has ris'n,
now releas'd from his frozen prison,
and walkes now upon the wyrld.
Gruddna, the Fyr-Draikke, Engine of Destruction, has from the Pit crawllen.
And Drauglir, greatest of them all, from blacken'd sky has fallen,
Darke Angel descends where the wyrld ends . . .'

Verge of the world, the northernmost rim of the continent, and beyond that the island of Melhus. A land of turmoil, of fire and ice, where the four elements wage constant war with each other. Winds filled with shards of ice scream like a host of rapacious demons from the very heart of Eisholm, terrible enough to flay the skin. Volcanoes there are too, mephitic behemoths of incandescent fury that cough great pyroclastic clouds upon the seething ice-fields below.

'. . . For Evil has forg'd its Avatars, and rais'd itself a tower, a kingdom of pestilence, a domain of resplendour infyrnal, and woulde reache oute its claws o'er this wyrld, Lyndormyn (whose carapace yet be so perniciously infest'd), rain in blood o'er lesser orders, and besmear its illimitable darkness o'er all . . .'

Vainglorious in their darksome apotheosis, the unholy trinity judge that heaven will suffer them to go unchallenged:

'. . . But the clash o' firmaments resounds, like the baying of Heaven's Houndes, o'er the beshiver'd ice of the Wyrld's Bounds, continent's jagged rim. For we came, warriors grim, Pel-Adan's finest, in numbers undream't of in this age or the last . . .'

Vanguard of Unferth-wielder, banners held high, horns blaring in defiance, the multitude of knights valiant journey to the land of fire and ice in ships beyond counting. Relentless, they storm the Maw, thrust on through the Moghol and arrive at last unto Smaulka-Degernerth, the Hall of Fire:

'. . . Then, earth-shaken, Gruddna did awaken, its coils unfurl'd, and haul'd its scaly bulk from the Underwyrld. Its head uprear'd thru the ebon smog, eyes flash'd like bescarletted stars thru fog, unfolded its wings, wall to wall, o'er the Hall o' Fyre . . .'

'Valour! Valour! We can do this. Just keep your eyes peeled for its weak spot, then shoot without hesitation. Don't hang about!'

'. . . Thru visor'd helm 'gainst the awful glare did we stare, and the hostages we now saw, hung spiked upon pinions' claw, the Oghain-Yddiaw, eyelids peel'd bare to afforde them no shield 'gainst the light so bright, blinding them of sight, steaming eyes milky-white . . .'

'Vizards down! It's coming in for another sweep . . . *Oh Hell!*'

'. . . With a roar that splinter'd this glassy hole, and lay our legions low as a field of hay, upon us the fiery juggernaut did roll. In a rush of beating wings that drove befor it the blackness of Hell's bowel, the nectar of its maw disgorg'd 'pon our ranks an ichor so foul, which then did kindle from the river of fyre to engulf us all . . .'

Victims now, some have time to scream then die, some to melt into mire, others merely to vanish into vapour.

Oaths, though, have been taken, votive entreaty that can be broken only upon most terrible retribution.

'. . . In that hall in multitudes did we fall, building a wall of blacken'd flesh, crisp'd meat, a dike of dead, insufferable heat. Yet thru befouling waftings of opiate smoke, tho reel we might, and scream and choke, our crossbows were let fly, loud as tempest's cry, and the air did sigh with the breath of God . . .'

Volley after volley of quarrels discharge over the molten river, igniting in the air as they fly, a rain of fire upon Fyr.

Veiled in sleeting, gouting crimson, trailing its own bowels along pinnacles of glass, Gruddna goes down for the last time.

There at the mouth of Lubang-Nagar, like a soul plummeting down to Hell can be heard the fall of the Fyr-Draikke. Of Scathur and Drauglir, though, not a sign is to be seen.

'. . . And when the smoke it lifted, there stood we, the shining soldiers of the Purging Sword, Peladanes of the One True Lord . . .'

VICTORY . . .

'G'

Prologue



WELL, THAT *DIDN'T GO SO WELL*, Scathur reflected as he made his way to his master's throne room.

No, that hadn't worked out so well at all. Gruddna, the Fyr-Draikke, was destroyed, and though both Scathur and Drauglir yet lived, there was something deeply, fundamentally displeasing about an Unholy Trinity made up now of just two.

They made jokes about Scathur, his lowliest foot soldiers did. 'Old Sca'-Face', they would call him. Impersonate the grandiosity of his walk, the grandiloquence of his talk. Satirize his risible attempts at poetry. Smirk at the vainglory of his vair-and-ermine attire, and moreover his refusal to wear black. And then one day they would find themselves, for the first time in their lives, actually within but a few yards of him, and all of a sudden the smiles faded and the jokes did not seem so funny after all.

And when they felt the rumour of his approach, smelt the soured air that went before him, and then at last laid eyes upon him close at hand, it was then they knew they would never laugh at anything ever again.

True fear, now, lurked in their eyes as Scathur approached. Their bearing might remain proud, their jaws firmly set, but there were indications in their manner that belied such apparent soldierly fearlessness. The steady gaze of the hunter tracking his quarry was

now replaced by a franticness in the way their eyes darted about in their sockets, accompanied by the dilation of nostrils, the irregular catch of breath in fear-dried throats. All such symptoms spoke of a terror scarcely concealed in the depths of their eyes, a terror that increased with each approaching footfall.

To others, these barely perceptible signs would have gone unnoticed, but Scathur had lived through many such conflicts and knew well the measure of a man. Even at this distance he could read these tell-tale minutiae, assessing the extent of a man's endurance as worry became fear, as fear descended into panic, and the point at which panic waxed into blind terror.

The hollow thud of his boots echoing down the stony passageway was like a fanfare of fear heralding his arrival to all in his path. And the mere sight of that swiftly approaching sinister figure, silhouetted against the smoky orange light of the sputtering wall-cressets, was enough to buckle many a man's knees beneath him.

As Scathur strode up to the throng of men who crowded the corridor, they instantly drew back to let him pass unhindered. He needed no godlike perspicacity now to sense their terror. There was, Scathur mused, even at a time like this, something immensely gratifying in the haste with which all living creatures got out of his way, *recoiled*, as if dreading even the touch of the bone-pale cloak that fluttered around his tall frame. Such fear was deep-rooted and instinctive: the primeval dread of the unknown.

Redoubtable, untouchable, himself without fear, Scathur was the ideal commander for his overlord's forces. Unswervingly loyal to his master, he carried out his every command with unquestioning obedience, and had done so for longer than anyone could remember. Many generations of men had lived out their lives on this turbulent island in the frigid northern seas, and yet Scathur had always been there, unchanged, unchallenged. Few could guess at the extent of the powers that lay hidden beneath his blank mantle of secrecy, or read the thoughts concealed behind his great-helm's impenetrable visor. Scathur confided in no man.

Yet for once his appearance of untouchable calm was deceptive. Had his men beheld his face, they would have seen the fear in their

own eyes mirrored there. For the first time in his centuries of untarnished service, the unthinkable had happened: Scathur had failed. And he alone could guess the terrible punishment that awaited him.

Even now the distant, muffled rumour of the siege way below had changed into the clearly definable clamour of clashing iron, screaming men, and the searing pyrotechnic spells of the magic-users getting closer. The siege hammers employed by the Peladanes from the south had finished their devastation of the outer defences, the wide moat of white-hot magma had been traversed, Gruddna the Fyr-Draikke was thrown down, and Scathur's men-at-arms were swiftly being forced to retreat from the lower levels up to the less effective defences of the intermediate ones. The necromancers' dark arts had failed to instil their usual terror into the legions of northerners, the Oghain-Yddiaw, whose morale was now fired by the new comradeship of the southern Peladanes, and whose frenzied fury was multiplied tenfold by so many years of yearned-for vengeance. They were relentless, as irresistible as the tide that lashed the island's jagged coast. Scathur had done his utmost, but this combination was beyond even him.

The destruction of Vaagenfjord Maw was at hand.

These feeble, sweating mortals before him, striving so uselessly to appear calm, knew only of *physical* pain. In the next few minutes such agony would become bad enough, but they had never beheld the Master, never known the awe-filled terror that arose from merely being in his presence. Only Scathur possessed the inhuman strength that enabled him to converse with his overlord, but on this occasion he wondered if even this was enough to help him tell this unearthly deity what he now had to reveal. And as soon as the Master beheld Scathur he would know of his fear.

Yet there was no getting away from it: he was totally bound to his master and powerless without him. So Scathur slowly began to ascend the smooth, black-and-violet marble steps that led to the forbidden chamber, leaving the confused rabble of frightened soldiers behind him to await whatever Fate had in store for them. They were beyond help anyway, the worthless creatures.

As the dull rhythm of Scathur's boots on the steps quickly faded, the last guardians of Vaagenfjord Maw gripped their battle-axes and faced the inevitable.

'My Lord Drauglir . . .' Scathur began, each word of confession making him nauseous, 'I bring you the latest report . . .'

Scathur stood all alone in the sudden quietness of the Chamber of Drauglir. Many times he had been here, and he knew it well, but this time was different. Upon entering the huge, echoing hall, he normally felt as if intruding on another world, even another time, some terrible plane of existence trapped in the mind of an ancient god. The blood-hued floor of polished marble seemed to mirror the ghastliness of the ceiling high above, with its grisly lattice-work of severed human heads spiked into every available gap and gaping down lifelessly at their tormentor below. And somehow the scarlet drapes that hung from the walls never ceased stirring, even without any movement of air in this vast room, as evidenced by the unwavering columns of acrid smoke that rose from the tall black candles all around. Even the ziggurat dominating the centre of the hall radiated an evil intent like some silent watcher. In its hellish vastness this whole chamber, glowing like magma and reeking of death, felt more animated now than the master who dwelt within it. Soundless still, he sat upon the altar atop the ziggurat, like an icon of Death incarnate.

Today all seemed changed: there was no power in this place. The awe that Scathur usually felt had evaporated. As he stood by the doorway through which he had just entered, it was as though he had just arrived into void, the burnt-out shell of a place that had once known greatness. He felt all alone within the hugeness of this ancient, whispering hall. Still he received no answer to his announcement, which echoed and then died. The place was as still as a crypt.

If he had possessed the ability to sweat, he would have done so as profusely as those feeble wretches outside. For an unaccustomed

sensation of fear rose inside him with each passing second of this awful silence. He dared to raise his eyes to the altar atop the lofty pyramid, trying to see beyond the great hooded reredos that presented itself to him like a blank wall. Why wasn't his master answering him? Had he fled? Could he be dead? Was Scathur now an unholy trinity of one?

Doubt added itself to his fear.

Suddenly the insidious hiss of Drauglir's voice cut through the silence, startling the captain out of his ponderings.

'A most enlightening report, Scathur. Whatever would I do without you?'

The sarcasm stung Scathur like a whiplash.

'Forgive my hesitation, Lord. I shall now come to the point.'

'Please do.'

'We have lost Gruddna, your dire eminence, and our situation appears beyond hope. The entire fjord festers with the warships of the Peladanes, abetted by the xebecs of the Oghain. The cliff defences have meanwhile succumbed to the overland assault of the Nahovians and their mercenary captains. The united front of this coalition is quite unprecedented, O Lord of the Night, quite total. All escape routes are blocked. The efforts of our necromancers have been ineffective in allaying this . . . In fact, if I dare say it, our own men seem the only ones to be terrified. And now that the Hall of Fire has been breached, and the Draikke cast down, and Lubang-Nagar penetrated, there seems no way of holding the foe back. The lower floors are taken, and their forces are rising through the mid-levels like a flood. Your army, O highest and most revered Icon of Darkness, cannot I fear hold them back for much longer.'

'So, nothing too bad, then,' sneered the voice from on high.

Stop playing with me, Drauglir, please . . . the dark commander entreated silently. The whole island was taken, and now that the Cult of Olchor had been forced underground by the Peladanes and this other new religion from the south, there was no further hope of outside help.

Judging by the death screams from dangerously close by, it

seemed now to be only a matter of minutes before the High Warlord of Pel-Adan would be hacking asunder the door to this very chamber with his Holy Greatsword.

Yet Drauglir sat here calmly awaiting the end of all his designs with seeming unconcern.

'What would you have me do, Lord?' Scathur pleaded.

Still the Rawgr held his calm. 'What *would* you do?' he asked.

'Attempt escape, perhaps?'

Instantly the whole hall flared up in a burning glow of scarlet as Drauglir at last chose to reveal himself, standing up in full view atop his altar. Scathur immediately averted his eyes.

'Brilliant!' his master exclaimed sardonically. 'I just knew you'd think of something clever.'

But there the sarcasm ceased. The deep-throated bellowing of the battle-maddened northmen, heralded by a screeching blast of their silver war-horns, now reached a triumphant note, and was quickly followed by the thunderous ascent of a multitude of hard-booted feet up the stairs leading to the door by which Scathur still stood.

'Sounds like the last of your puny humans are being wiped out,' Drauglir spat in contempt.

A horribly unfamiliar feeling of panic now rose in Scathur's throat as the enemy surged relentlessly up the steps outside.

'Escape? Yes, Scathur, escape indeed – that's all that remains now. Listen carefully, my most trusted servant, for there are scant moments left to us.'

The change in his master's voice caused Scathur to look up sharply. Just ere the avenging army poured into the chamber, Drauglir was talking as if there might be some hope, some last plan to save them from the nemesis that awaited them.

Drauglir continued: 'Any hopes of I myself escaping this island were dashed long ago, I realize.'

– *What's this?!*

'Were I even to try the secret way up to the ice-field, our enemy would still find me before long, as the whole island is theirs now. They will not stop till they see me dead.'

– *No!*

'You, though, mean little to them. Were you to lie low in the hidden place of Ravenscairn, you might be safe there.'

'. . . But what of yourself, my lord?' Scathur implored. Why was his master suddenly talking like this? What was he, Scathur, worth without him?

But a new tone now crept into Drauglir's voice. 'Forget it, Scathur, my time has come. Bring me the Sword now . . .'

And so Scathur, unable to disobey this command even now, fixed his mind upon this, his final task. On the other side of the door could be heard the death screams of the last of his troops. Time was when he might have tarried to listen with relish, enraptured by those alluring sounds of torment and despair. But this was the end of everything, and Scathur was now oblivious to such distractions.

Solemnly, he approached with the Sword.

The door that separated Scathur from the marauders outside was strong. Forged by the fire-giants from adamantine steel in the depths of their deepest, most hallowed smithies, strengthened by the ichor of unspeakable underworld deities, and embellished with silver images – of the fires of the infernal abyss – which framed its broad surface, it was able to withstand even the mightiest of the Peladanes' siege-engines.

But *they* had magic too. For the worshippers of Pel-Adan had come prepared this time. Even now the Jutul-wrought portal that stood between them and victory was buckling under the power of their magic-users' spells. The silver tongues of flame bordering the door now glowed fiercely red from the heat of the magic that was beginning to consume them, resembling now more closely the legendary fires that they imitated. A few moments more, and the door would explode.

In the huge but crowded passageway outside the Chamber of Drauglir, Arturus Bloodnose stood fidgeting behind the vanguard of his men. As smoke gradually filled the air, and the fountain of

blue sparks struck from the yielding steel increased in brilliance, so the sweat trickled increasingly down the High Warlord's fleshy face. All the while, a continuous stream of arcane power poured from the magic-users' fingertips, relentlessly wearing down the resistance of the giant-built portal. In seconds it would be down, and nothing would stand between Drauglir and his fate. Then those long years of meticulous planning, rigorous training and endless diplomatic exchanges between the Peladanes and the other armies of the Fasces league would soon be vindicated. And Arturus Bloodnose, High Warlord of Pel-Adan, bearer of the Holy Great-sword, was the one ordained to wield that fatal stroke.

As he gripped the hilt of this ancient blade, clamping and unclamping his fingers around its sweat-sodden leather grip, his men could sense the panic that threatened to snap their leader's nerve in this overcrowded place. Yet they also knew perfectly well that he would not be the first to enter the chamber, for that glorious duty was the lot of others. Not the Elite, those fanatics of his bodyguard who had trained for years for just this final assault, protected throughout the siege itself by lesser fighters so they could be here for the *coup de grâce*. Instead this honour fell to the Anointed, that special corps who had been granted the privilege of providing the first wave of the Soldiers of God to finally come to grips with the Evil One.

Arturus glanced over at them briefly as they were hustled up from the rear. Pressed tightly together, the hundred and fifty Anointed were soon assembled immediately behind the magic-users. Though future sagas would never dwell on this, the Anointed were a mixture of old men who had seen better days and young boys who might never get that chance.

A good combination of wise experience and youthful vigour, Arturus assured himself as he stepped further out of the way.

The old men were trembling in anticipation, tears and death in their eyes; the boys, some looking as young as eight, merely gaped around themselves in puzzlement. All bore whatever scraps of armour and weaponry they had managed to scrounge from their families.