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by

Lee Clark Zumpe

Dusk gradually nibbled away at the evening until darkness swallowed the sky. A high, thin layer of mist held back both moon and stars, and the forest of Kilern grew as black as a bat's hide. Atop the ridge crests of surrounding mountains, Oquada spied the faint glow of a dozen bonfires set to commemorate the start of holy night.

"We've done well, Dumaar," Oquada said, referring to the profits of the day's sales. Business always went well in the human settlements, but this trip had proven particularly lucrative. Still, his senior partner seemed somewhat less than satisfied. The dwarven trader grinned as he plucked a drumstick from the hot coals of the campfire. "We've made more in one afternoon than we have throughout the whole harvest season, you secured the icon desired by your patron, and we dine on fresh

game on the Eve of Shadows, yet you do not smile. What troubles you?"

"I am pleased with our earnings," the elder dwarf responded, tugging on his long, gray beard, "But something has bothered me since we left Bhanberg. The forest is not as it should be..."

"You are old," the young peddler said to his elder. "I fear your senses are failing you."

"Perhaps it is just this night which disturbs me. You forget that I lived during the last age of wizards, and I beheld the ceremonies they practiced on the Eve of Shadows." Dumaar gave thanks that the festivals now bore little similarity to the ones that inspired them. "Still, I feel as though someone has trailed us since we set out."

“Ha!” Oquada had never met a human brave enough to face Kilern after dark. “None of those villagers would set foot in this forest after nightfall.”

“Aye, I’ll concede that point. I must say I myself would prefer to be nestled in a warm bed at the Troll’s Head Hostel.”

“Sleep in an inn?” Oquada raised a brushy eyebrow. “You are growing soft with age. Perhaps you should retire at the close of this trip.”

“With the sale of this icon to Lord Duhlon, I just might do that.”

“I should say!” Oquada’s face grew red, his eyes grew narrow with mischief. “Let us have another look at it, then, old man.”

“No!” cried Dumaar, drawing back from the campfire. “It is not a toy to be poked and prodded and handled by commoners like us.”

“Oh, bring it out once more, Dumaar: I’m not likely ever to see such a relic for the rest of my days.”

“Oh, very well,” the aging dwarf finally consented, “But only your gaze may settle upon it. If one of those dirty little fingers should happen to tap it, you will find yourself one finger short on your return home.”

From a pouch on his back Dumaar plucked the relic. The trader from whom he swindled it had neatly wrapped it in a piece of scarlet cloth. The dwarf now unfolded the fabric delicately revealing a long, curved object white as bone. Its smooth surface beckoned to Oquada; its dagger sharp point challenged him to run his hand across it to see if it could easily tear the flesh.

“It is exquisite.” Oquada stared at it intently, marveling at its size and form, trying to imagine the beast which had spawned it. He tried to envision the army that had vanquished such a horror, too.

“This is one of but a handful of dragon fangs now known to exist.” Dumaar gently picked up the object and held it close to the flames. The light shimmered against its burnished surface. “The wizards stole most of them from the pits in Gahldar where our armies slew the last of the Great Wurms many centuries ago.”

“Why did they plunder them?”

“The wizards wished to use them to complete their spells and augment their power. Given the opportunity, they might have tried to raise a new brood of dragons. I have heard tell that with a dragon fang alone, a new dragon can be sired.”

“That is not possible!” cried Oquada, his eyes growing wide.

“Have you never heard the Rime of the Last Wurm: ‘Slain be the dragons, never please their thirst, the last of the dragons, shall ever be the first.’ The wizards understood the meaning of those cryptic verses, and had they not been defeated they would have bred a hoard of dragons to claim as allies.” Dumaar studied the fang as he spun back down the years, remembering the wars of his generation. In his youth, he had fought against Siewak the Strange and Ubbo-Sumock; his contemporaries crushed the last of the wizards and cleansed the lands of their malfeasance. “Such relics are dangerous, and must be guarded closely by the nobility lest we recklessly invite damnation upon our souls.”

“And this is why Lord Duhlon commissioned you to seek out and acquire this artifact?” Oquada succumbed to temptation and reached out to grasp the dragon fang, but Dumaar quickly snatched it away. “Do you not think that your patron might be plotting to harness the power in this relic, to use it for his own purposes?”

“No,” the elder dwarf said angrily, now busily replacing the dragon fang in the folds of fabric. “Lord Duhlon is a virtuous nobleman. His only goal is to see that this piece is kept under lock and key, guarded from those who might wish to misuse it. Surely you can see the value in that?”

“No,” Oquada said, drawing a dagger from his belt, “I am afraid I cannot.”

The black night split as a feathered shaft whistled from the shadowy thicket beyond the reach of the fire’s light. Dumaar recognized the gentle purring of the bow string too late. The arrowhead burrowed into his back below his right shoulder blade even as he reached for his sword. Its tip quickly erupted from the startled dwarf’s chest, loosing a cascade of blood. The dragon fang slipped from his grasp and tumbled to the ground.

“Oquada,” the elder dwarf gasped, blood already bubbling over his lips and trickling down his chin, “What have you done...you do not understand...”

Dumaar slumped forward and fell to the forest floor shuddering. He landed on the dragon fang.

“Move!” Oquada shouted angrily, kicking his senior partner roughly. “Don’t break the damn thing!” He rolled the old dwarf over on his back, snapping the arrow in the process. Blood soaked the scarlet cloth which sheathed the dragon fang, and Oquada removed it hastily. Inside, the relic remained intact. “I’d have slain you again had you broken this with your fall, you fat old fool.”

The dwarf’s blood made the dragon fang

slick and it glistened in the dancing flames of the campfire. Oquada smiled, held his prize high and admired it.

“For this,” a voice rang out in the darkness, “You called on me?” Another dwarf stepped into the ring of firelight, his face covered with dirt. Leafs and twigs clung to his long hair and beard. “Could you not have slain this frail old one with your own hands?”

“Listen, Iquawlf: Dumaar was once a great warrior, a killer of trolls and slayer of wizards,” Oquada said, defending himself. “I thought it wise to take no unnecessary risk with a treasure like this.”

“Wipe it clean,” the old dwarf suddenly sputtered, his voice no more than a faint cry. “Wash my blood off the fang, quickly.”

“What is that he is saying,” asked Oquada, “Can you understand him?”

“Not with all that blood in his throat,” laughed Iquawlf. He picked up Dumaar’s own sword and finished the job. “Shall we strike south tonight, or wait for morning to head to Dahgil’s Keep?”

“While I long to see that sinister little wood-witch’s eyes ignite when she gazes upon this fine relic,” Oquada smiled, “I think it best that we rest here and travel by daylight.”

Together, the scheming brothers dragged poor Dumaar’s corpse into the woods, then settled down by the campfire. Sleep silently embraced the dwarves, and the forest of Kilern grew silent and still. Oquada dreamed of the rewards the wood-witch would bestow upon them, both in terms of gold and sensuality.

Oquada awoke shortly before dawn, coughing uncontrollably as thick smoke wormed into his lungs and choked him. Fire besieged the forest of Kilern, and flames hungrily lapped at the trees all around the clearing. He grasped his brother’s shoulder and shook him, trying to rouse him. Iquawlf rested on his side, his back to his brother.

He did not stir at Oquada's urging.

"Wake up!" Oquada howled, tugging fiercely on his brother's shoulder. Iquawlf's mutilated body then rolled over, its featureless face looking skyward absently. The dwarf's flesh had been ripped away, his guts half-devoured by some ravenous animal.

Though the light of dawn already painted the sky, a fresh and awful darkness suddenly swallowed the dwarf. Before he

could take air into his lungs to scream, winds whipped the flames and whisked burning leaves high into the air. A cloud of dirt and dust billowed up from the forest floor around him.

Oquada raised his eyes skyward hesitantly. He saw it, and he shuddered. The little dwarf watched in terror as a newborn dragon swooped down toward him, eager to further satiate its thirst for blood.

