

Purpose

By Emil Erik Hansen

The waves had battered the ship around the ocean for the most of the day, forcing all of the crew and most of the passengers to be active both above and below deck. This had ended the almost too perfect trip across the northern Twin Seas, to their destination of Kurast, on the shores of Kehjistan. Despite being a stout and hardened paladin, Etophir was not a friend of the seas. While the numbers of foes he had slain in combat outnumbered the various forms of water-traversing vessels at least tenfold, he had still done his best to help out before the weather had started to go against them.

It was difficult comparing a trip like this to anything else Etophir had ever experienced in his life, but fighting against a truly persistent enemy had some similarities, and this was the reason he had ventured east in the first place. Around a year ago, the forces of King Leoric had launched a large attack on Westmarch. Etophir had been in the front, battling the forces and ending the lives of people that could, just as well, have been his closest friends and brothers in arms. They had been part of the older order of paladins, the Hand of Zakarum. Their fighting style had been a lot more fanatical, with swift crushing blows that had often killed unprepared warriors in a split second. Most of the warriors had carried two-handed axes and poleaxes, as opposed to the Knights of Westmarch, who wore shields and swords, and fought with precise blows. Etophir had, despite them being his enemy, admired their vigorous zeal. He had later found out that it had been the work of maddening corruption, brought indirectly to Leoric by Diablo, the Lord of Terror, now vanquished below Tristram. Still, Etophir had still been curious as to the happenings of this older order, but all talk about it had been shunned after the incidents that ultimately lead to the death of both Leoric and his men. To find out more, Etophir had traveled to Tristram, to see if anyone in the town could tell him more about these soldiers; that had led him to Kurast.

“LAND AHOY!”

The yell pierced the noise from everywhere and almost made Etophir loosen his grip and stumble as he swung his body to an upright position. Not too far ahead, the shore could be seen. For now, all he could do, was holding the railing tight and pray that they would reach the dock within nightfall.

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As far as Natalya knew, things hadn't changed much at the dock-city of Kurast over the past times. She had been ordered to await further instructions from her superiors – not a thing was said about what the actual purpose of her mission was. That was the only thing she hated about the Viz'Jaq'taar – they were assassins, sworn to hunt down rogue magi who had abandoned the ways of the Vizjerei, not stay around and wait for stuff to magically happen. She knew something was amiss in the inner parts of Kurast, but knew better than to disobey her masters. The corruption of the city had brought most of the townsfolk to the dock-city, but didn't seem to have reached further than that. Despite her bitterness for lack of action, Natalya had stayed put and surveyed the townsfolk, looking out for suspicious incidents. In the few weeks she had been there, nothing –

besides the weather changing – had happened.

Luckily, as the sun was about to set, something potentially interesting had happened; a ship had arrived. There had only been one remotely interesting person on board, which also stood out severely from the sea-hardened sailors. This one, it seemed, had not been fond of the past days rough weather, and had stumbled to the barracks to get some proper rest without a word, much to the enjoyment of the rest of the crew. Still, he hadn't looked like a weak man, and had emanated a form of magical aura. At that point, Natalya was not entirely sure if that was a good or bad thing.

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The sun had almost risen, when Etophir left the docks. He had been unable to sleep any longer, and knew he had a long trek ahead of him, so getting off early was a good thing. His lack of sleep hadn't only been caused by high humidity. It was because of a recurring dream that had unsettled him more and more, every time it came back. It had started not long after he had left Tristram, and had revolved around his brief contact with the hero that had vanquished Diablo. It had always been a very vivid and detailed dream, but what troubled Etophir the most, is that he couldn't figure out exactly what unsettled him about it. As he had did many times before, he tried to think through the dream – and his visit to Tristram – in order to figure it out.

The tavern of Tristram had probably never been as filled with people as the day Etophir had chosen to arrive. It had been around a week after the defeat of Diablo, and after the hero had triumphantly returned from the depths of the Cathedral dungeons. Slowly, people had started pouring back to the city, some to congratulate the hero, others simply to take part in the festivities and some to take advantage of the, now safe, undiscovered recesses of the dungeons. The noise in the tavern would have been unbearable for those not used to an ordinary joyful tavern, and it was obvious that the many costumers had meant a higher priority to serving than maintaining a clean and orderly place. Such was the nature of any good tavern, and it didn't seem to bother any of the guests. Etophir had, mostly because of him being sober, noticed it as well as the many guests that would've been thrown out from the more refined taverns back in Westmarch. There was one thing all taverns had in common however – this was the place to look for gossip, and overhear things. The barkeep often knew more than the various towns' elderly sages.

As he neared the bar, Etophir had stumbled and accidentally his shoulder had hit a robed figure, who turned around and stared coldly at him, locking Etophir in place. In such a crowded place, it wasn't uncommon at all to collide with another person, but this impact had been quite rough. Etophir had apologized, and the man had simply kept staring at him for a while, gave an overbearing smile, turned and walked toward the exit of the tavern. For some reason, everyone seemed to manage to keep just enough distance from him, despite not going in a straight line...

That was usually where the dream ended. Etophir had soon found out, that the man had been none other than the legendary warrior who had slain Diablo. The barkeep, Ogden, had explained that he always been a man of few words, and that the combination of fame, constant questions from everyone, and the horrors he had experienced, had probably been the reason for being so secluded. That had lead Etophir to try to recall as much as he could about the moment he had

collided with the man – and he realized that he couldn't remember how he actually looked. The robe had covered his figure and most of his hair, but his face had been visible. The eyes had been strong and green, bordering brown. The rest of his features had probably just been those of any ordinary battle-hardened soldier which Etophir had seen a great amount of: a strong jaw, flat nose and a skinned tanned from countless hours of being outside. He kept trying to re-remember detailed features about the face, and the more he did, the more doubts about them appeared. The eyes had been brown – not green – the red tones had definitely been stronger. The smile hadn't really looked as a smile, but more... grim.

A rumbling sound brought Etophir back to the jungle, as an enormous tree trunk seemed to have launched itself at him from his right. Barely in time, he got his shield up, which instantly started to glow, but the sheer force behind the blow still forced him to a crouching position, that sent the trunk over him, and almost made Etophir collapse from the weight. The subtle sound of burning wood reached him, just as another rumble came from his left. Being halfway stunned from the enormous blow, his reflexes had been severely slowed, which resulted in another trunk slamming into him the very split second he saw it in the corner of his eye. The blow sent him flying and landing stomach-first heavily on the ground, knocking the air out of his lungs. He barely registered a huge figure stomping out of the jungle's dense vegetation, before passing out.

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The paladin was nowhere to be found. As far as Natalya knew, he had left unnoticed very early. The sailors hadn't been of much use, having used the reunion with their oversea friends to get drunk – and that meant heavy sleep. They had been very eager to assist with what information they could provide, but the only bit of information she could have any use for was his intentions – but of that, they knew nothing. Typical of sailors to know everything about nothing and nothing about everything.

Natalya had spent most of the morning wondering what the paladin's purpose was. What brought a foreigner to these parts? Why was he without any form of guide? Why didn't he at least bring one of the Iron Wolf hirelings? Pondering such things was usually not in Natalya's liking – but it was all she could do, while her orders kept her pinned at the docks. And, why did she even care? It was not often travelers came, as far as she had found out. Perhaps it was just her boredom and the fact that she had heard of a notable increase in sightings of various animal – and worse – from the jungle, ever since she had arrived. Hopefully the paladin had the required skills to battle foes not of human origin.

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The fresh sensation of cold water in his face awoke Etophir instantly. While returning to his senses, he noticed the figure that had most likely saved his life. It was a man clad in garments of which he had only heard stories, who sat very close to him, while holding a small bowl and looking at him with an intense stare. Etophir noticed the hilt of a huge weapon strapped behind the figure's long haired face. His training told him to get to a defensive combat position at once, but something about the man made him keep still and remain calm. Besides, he was still too dizzy to do any form

of combat, let alone make any fast movements.

“How are you feeling?” the man asked after a few moments. He spoke the language of the west, but with a heavy accent.

“I’m all right – what happened? How long have I been gone?”

“A few moments at most, I heard the monster as it attacked you, and rushed here as fast as I could”, the man replied.

“A monster? What monster?” Etophir grimaced. The man didn't answer immediately, but smiled slyly and gestured to something behind him. A big stone-like oval object lay behind him – only, it wasn't made of stone. Etophir rose, to take a closer look, and realized that it was made of wood. The man noticed his fascination, and began to explain.

“What you see is the remains of what most refer to as a 'Thrasher'. They were once the ancestral protectors of the jungles here, but they seem to have been consumed by an unknown corruption. It was the tree that assaulted you unprovoked – you were lucky I was around.” He paused, seemingly expecting something from Etophir. As nothing happened, he continued: “As far as I'm informed, the Council of Zakarum isn't expecting any overseas visitors. What brings you here, Knight of Westmarch?”

Wanting to get on good terms, Etophir told his story: of why he had traveled all the way to Kurast, of his battles against King Leoric's troops and of his interests in this different order of paladins. His companion, named Bremm, in return told him that he was, much to Etophir's delight and amazement, one of the members of the High Council of Zakarum – the highest ranked champions of the order. They were ruled by the Que-Hegan, a strong noble leader that ruled his people from the temple-city of Travincal. Unknown to the western part of the world, the order had thrived well and stood their ground against the jungle's steadily increasing corruption. But, for some reason, they had been denied access to the docks and been attacked on sight as the townsfolk believed them to be just as corrupted as well.

“I see sense in you, Etophir”, Bremm paused and looked down, “and it's why what I must ask you to do, will trouble you. It's a cruel act, but it must be done if we are to live in peace.” He looked up again and his eyes met Etophir's. They were filled with grim determination.

“Tell me what to do – and exactly why”, he silently replied.

“Very well. As you might know, the corruption has increased steadily the last couple of weeks, and as a result we have kept track of the increased sightings, intensity and movements. At first, we thought it was from some part of the jungle, but had no luck figuring out where. Then we realized that it was being sent from the dock itself.”

“*What?!*” Etophir couldn't help himself from bursting out. “But that's ... *impossible!* I don't know much about this place, but that sounds downright absurd!” *Or was it?* If a corruption could befall the great Leoric of Khanduras, surely *anything* was possible. He looked at Bremm again, and realized that he looked slightly surprised by his sudden outburst. “Excuse my outburst. Carry on. What is it that I must do?” he added.

“Your concern is understandable, and it *does* sound absurd – but it fits in with their hostility towards us. It's as if they think we are a part of the corruption as well. Our theories, mostly based on what our scouts have reported, tells us that the man behind it is Ormus. Does that tell you anything?”

Etophir tried to remember the man. His short time at the docks had not let him get to know, lest see many of the inhabitants, but he did remember overhearing the sailors mentioning him when he was trying to fall asleep the night before. Apparently, Ormus seemed like he had lost his mind some time ago and while being both intelligent, wise and powerful – something had gone wrong at some point.

“Not much, other than being slightly deranged”, was Etophir's only reply.

“He's a powerful man, and once belonged to our great civilization. How and why he ended up at the docks and became how he is... is sadly a mystery. What we know for certain is that if we do not stop him, our city will be overrun by the monsters of the jungle. On top of that, the latest reports suggest that he's preparing something big, and has set up a magical shield that prevents any unwanted entry – which now includes our order. The only solution is you.”

“So...”, Etophir paused, slightly worried, “you want me to kill Ormus?”

“Yes. It's a horrible thing to ask, but it has to be done – it's the only solution. You'd better hurry.”

With that, he picked up Etophir's shield that still lay on the ground, and handed it to him. An understanding nod was all Etophir returned, as he in turn took his sword, and started the walk back towards the docks. No more words were spoken between the two.

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The small ship had arrived almost unnoticed. Unlike the previous one, Natalya hadn't noticed it until it was almost docked. Awareness was one of the necessary abilities of her order, which had disturbed her even further. She blamed the constant wondering of the paladin – this only made it worse. Even more strange was the fact that this boat only had three people on board. One was a weak small man; the others were tall robed figures that didn't reveal anything of their past, destination or looks. However, there was a strange magic signature about the two robed figures, one that Natalya didn't recognize. This time however, she decided to take action, and take a closer look.

Just as the trio strode past the place where Ormus usually stood, they split up. The small man and one of the robed figures walked straight through the town, and headed for the wilderness, while the other robed man stopped a distance from Ormus. As Natalya crept closer, she noticed Ormus' facial expression – it had turned severely harsh, and frightened. Something was not right. For a split-second, he noticed Natalya and quickly shifted his eyes back on the man. He did however notice what had happened, and turned with a speed that didn't match the pace he'd walked with in any way – but saw nothing. Natalya had hid behind one of the rock formations, and chose to stay there until the figure had left. One thing was sure – he had not been pleasant company. She intended on figuring out just who he, and his two companions, was, and what the reason for the sudden increased influx of people to this deserted place. And, more importantly, if it had any connection to the reason she was chosen to remain here.

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The trip back to the docks felt longer than Etophir remembered it being. Perhaps it was the fact that he actually spent time noticing that the jungle did seem rather unnatural. There were no sounds of ordinary insects or birds, but it still felt like he was being watched by every single one of them. The air was heavy and the water seemed a bit more like something taken out of a swamp. There were long shadows from most trees, even though the sun was at its peak. The other reason was, that he was deeply lost in thought, and wondering whether what Bremm had told him had been correct or not. He would have to take a closer look at this Ormus person. He dismissed his doubts, as the sense of raw determination and purpose filled him – Kurast had just gotten into viewing range.

A few yards from the entry, a robed figure stood, and seemed to await his arrival. As Etophir came closer, he seemed to recognize the figure, despite his hood almost completely covering his face. The jaw however, was unmistakable. As he got closer, he felt as if something was completely wrong. He tightened his grip on his sword, as the robed figure seemed to notice that he had gotten close.

“So, we meet again” he smiled, and the grin turned absurdly wide, almost inhuman. Etophir took a step back, his senses preparing for whatever could happen.

“What brings you to the East?” he asked, trying his best to sound calm and focused. Normally it took quite a bit to scare him, but there was something unmistakably wrong about the situation.

“You should know that, Etophir... My destiny is at hand – just as yours is!”

“How do you know my -”

Etophir froze, as the man suddenly pulled back his hood. It was as if all of the nightmares he had had his entire life was relived in a few seconds, each and every one of them suddenly revolving around the two men's meeting in Tristram. Two glowing – no, *burning* eyes pierced his own – and he recognized them down to the smallest detail. What had just been a hard stare, now felt like it was leeching out his very soul. The eyes weren't the most horrible about the face. In the man's forehead, a piece of red crystal stuck out, pulsing the very same red glow that the eyes emanated. The face was exactly as he had seen it before, and he was sure that it had been hidden from everyone else by some demonic illusion – the only intend to plague his soul from that day forward. He suddenly tripped backwards, and fell hard on his back, fumbling defenseless on the ground. Despite it being the last thing he wanted to do at this moment, he met the gaze again.

“*Diablo...*” he slowly whispered, having realized that the man in front of him was merely a husk, an empty shell containing the greater evil that had resulted in all the misery and chaos in and around Tristram. With new-found determination, he gathered all his strength and swung himself back up. Diablo himself had just waded straight through the town, unharmed, untroubled – as if invited. Ormus had simply *let* him, Diablo, the Lord of Terror, through. As he rushed for the bridge leading to the docks, he heard a manic laugh in the distance behind him.

“I may not be able to stop *you*, but I can prevent any further evil to befall this place!” Etophir muttered under his breath, as his eyes scanned for the one man that would be the reason for the horrors of this part of the world. And he, Etophir, would bring an end to him – no matter the cost.

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Bremm had arrived to Travincal within a short time. The meeting with Etophir had not been part of the plan, and he had initially thought him to be someone else. As fate would it, he had planned something much better, something that would please the Que-Hegan. As he took the last few steps towards the main temple, he was welcomed by his friends and fellow high council members. Geleb, the most vocal of them, stepped forward.

“Bremm, what news do you bring, and what of our special guest?”

“Things didn't turn out exactly as planned – but there's no reason to worry”, Bremm replied with a sinister laugh, and told of his modifications to the grand plan that would forever change their future.

The Thresher had only been the first part, a means to test if their guest was the one expected by their master. They had been told he would have no problems with anything they could possibly summon forth, and throw in his way – that had been the Que-Hegan's wish. He wanted to be perfectly sure that this man was none other than the one he expected. Bremm had not been completely honest with Etophir, but he knew that puppets wouldn't do his bidding if they knew the whole truth. The origin of the corruption was a lie, and Ormus' knowledge of the old Zakarum magic was the only reason the pathetic resistance at the docks was still existent in any shape or form. Etophir had been a most fortunate opportunity. If he succeeded in slaying Ormus, good. If not... all the same. Their guest would see to that.

“Well done, Bremm. Why don't you inform the Que-Hegan himself of the good news? I'm certain he'll be pleased”, Geleb smiled and looked at the others, “Wyand and Maffer, you should accompany him and help with the preparations. When our guest arrives, we will finally be able to ascend to our destiny!” The three men quickly turned and strode down the heavy set of stairs in the middle of the temple, leading to the chambers of the Que-Hegan, leaving the remaining council members awaiting their soon to be arriving guest.

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Things had happened incredibly fast all of a sudden. From out of nowhere, the paladin had returned from the jungle, storming towards the center of the town. Natalya all too quickly – and much to her bewilderment – noticed that he had found what he sought: Ormus. While that was not as strange itself, he was holding his shield up, and preparing his sword for a fatal strike. Dismissing her surprise, her combat training kicked in, and she ran as fast as she could to meet the paladin, before he could reach Ormus. At the exact second Etophir raised his sword to charge in, he was slammed away by powerful kick in his side. Natalya's training was much focused on martial arts, but the Viz'Jaq'taar also put great pride in their stealth and preciseness. As Etophir got to his feet, she prepared for whatever the paladin had at his arsenal. Ormus was standing a distance away, seemingly lost in trance, and had not noticed the struggle happening mere feet away from him. Attempting getting him to safety would render them both vulnerable – Etophir had to be dealt with first.

“What are you doing?! Don't you see what is going on? He's evil – he's bringing this land to its *end!*” he groaned, fixing his eyes upon Natalya, and threw himself at her, shield first, in an attempt to knock her unconscious. Sadly for him, Natalya was quicker, and deflected the blow with her

claws, making Etophir fly past her. As he did, she suddenly realized what had happened, and why she had doubted this magical aura he had, when she first saw him. It had not been the ordinary magic of the paladins he had emanated, but rather the weak beginnings of demonic corruption – a thing she had seen all too often. This also meant that there was no hope of redemption – the demonic taint was an irreversible effect, and countless attempts of turning the victims had often resulted in near death experiences. Dismissing any forms of pity, Natalya threw herself after Etophir, claws first, impaling the paladin before he had any chance to realize what had happened.

Another ship had anchored the next day, and luckily this had several capable passengers, set on defeating the evil of this part of the lands. Knowing that a would-be hero – and a *paladin* at that – just as themselves, had seemingly easily falling prey to deep corruption and slain not long ago, would only serve to diminish their hopes. They needed no further worries than the mission of defeating the prime evils. Perhaps it was best this way. Natalya had disposed of the body, not telling anyone of the incident – not even Ormus. She had however voiced her opinions of the safety of the docks, and it seems that had let him to consult his old scrolls and tomes. Natalya didn't delve deeper into that, not wanting to raise suspicion. At least, she had found a purpose – much different from her normal tasks – until she received her orders: ensure the safety of Ormus.

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In the jungle, a hooded figure had observed everything that had happened. He smiled grimly, as he marveled at how easy the human race was to bend to the prime evils' wills. The new arrivals that had followed him from the west could prove to be further testing subjects for his last unsettled doubt – should he, Diablo, lead the humans to destroy each other, or merely crush them himself? They should at least get a taste of the horrors that awaited them, if they turned out to be resistant to raw, demonic terror.