

Duty

The wind blew fiercely outside the mouth of the cave, drowning out the meal-time chatter of the soldiers huddled within.

The camp fire blazed and crackled, returning a little warmth to the hands and feet of those close by. Thick smoke veered off into one of the many natural vents between the huge boulders that formed the cave's roof. A cauldron of bubbling mutton stew hung from a spear haft, suspended a little way above the fire. The rich aroma of spices and meat set everyone's taste buds to an expectant frenzy, and a weary distraction crept over the men with the promise of food and rest. It was well after dark, and at the meal's conclusion a picket would be set and the men would try to grab some sleep. A hard day's march up into the mountains was now behind them. Another day's march higher still was before them when the sun rose.

A dozen men had left the safety of the fortress at T'pvar pass three days past. They all now crammed themselves into the confines of the cave – large enough though it was, spacious for twelve and all their provisions and material of war it was not. The limits of the cave had been determined, and despite the small gaps to the mountainside outside, it was as safe a camp as they could hope for.

Before they had left the safety of their fortress, the High Warden had instructed them to hunt down the beast that had been preying on merchant caravans for the last month. They had been surprised, and glad, to learn that he would be joining them on this hunt. Their commander was none other than Luther Draxos; famed Wizard of their house, the noble House of Durant.

Warden Draxos had told them that the beast was no mere mountain lion, or hunger addled bear looking for an easy meal. It was reported that feathers had been found at the site of each grizzly attack. Very particular feathers, that could have been left by only one creature.

The quarry they hunted, so said the High Warden, was no less than a Plumed Saurian – a name certain to inspire fear throughout their ranks. These great feathered lizards lived higher up the mountain; in cave networks that continued all the way back down into the depths where thermal vents provided them with the warmth they needed to survive at cooler altitudes.

It was an exceedingly rare thing for them to come down the mountain due to the plentiful food to be found in their habitat. All manner of horrible creatures fought for dominance with the Plumed Saurians, and the winners feasted on the corpses of those that proved insufficiently strong to survive. For some weeks now the Durant soldiers of T'pvar had wondered and wagered on why a Saurian had come hunting on unfamiliar paths.

The men felt comforted to have the great Luther Draxos at their side. Despite his *accident*, he still was a powerful ally, a reliable leader, and as honourable man as they had ever served under. Despite the danger, for the beast they hunted was a fell creature with few equals at the art of slaughter, they knew they could rely on the High Warden.

Still, the men gave him a respectfully wide berth, for he wasn't known for his conversation. Since his fall from grace Luther's reticence to converse had only magnified. He now sat in silence a little way off. His eyes were closed and his breaths were deep and calm. The thrumming from his magical arm, a source of wonderment and fear even to those who knew him, set the teeth of the men on edge. It joined the crackling of the fire and the howling of the wind, a wordless percussion that only served to further weary them.

Conversation renewed amongst the soldiers. They discussed their mission, food, women, and anything else that crossed their minds. They talked with an easiness and informality that told of their long service together and a strong bond of camaraderie. Luther resisted reacting to the countless infractions of protocol he was listening to, and no doubt would be witnessing if he just opened his eyes. He held his tongue, for he had marched the men with little rest these last few days and he would not begrudge them a moment or two of levity.

That is the pathway to failure, whispered a familiar voice in his head – a voice that was both his and yet utterly alien to him. *You encourage them to ignore their duty and thus take a greater share of blame when they fall. Your failure as a man infects those who serve you.*

Luther's face twitched in annoyance. Ever since the day he had failed his duty in G'Barr, this voice – something he considered to be the voice of his subconscious hatred for himself, had plagued his thoughts. Even in his sleep it sometimes found him, chiding Luther for nothing more than his harmless dreams of what had been.

He pushed the words to the back of his mind, but they had already bitten deep from his sense of duty. He rose quietly and opened his eyes. "Soldiers of Durant," he called out with an air of authority. "Have you forgotten your training?"

The men snapped to attention at his voice, and the thread of disappointment in it.

"Chatter is the enemy of duty," Luther continued. "Is the perimeter secure? Have all precautions been taken already? Perhaps this is why you now feel comfortable enough to discuss the relative merits of milkmaids and tavern wenches." His keen, dark eyes regarded them all and he saw them blanch in shame.

The soldiers dispersed in an instant. Their chatter ceased and silence reigned, punctuated only by the wind, the fire, and the thrumming from Draxos' arm. "You know the drill," Luther said, his voice clear and with a quiet strength that rarely saw it raised. "Four men eat, and the rest stand guard or prepare for tomorrow. Then the next four eat, and so on, until we are all done. I shall eat last, and I have little hunger so do not leave a share greater than is my right as a soldier."

He pointed to four of his men at random. He knew their names, but he had no favourites and treated the men equally. He was a man of resolve and justice; he loved all those that served him as a brother in arms should. "Jaun, Thom, Chis and Dirk. You shall be first." The named men wasted no time in availing themselves of the steaming food.

Luther walked to the mouth of the cave and gazed into the dark night. The sound of the wind was comforting to him, as were the men at his back. He was born to be a soldier; he still felt this in his bones, despite some uncertainty over almost every other thing he had ever held to be true about himself.

A shriek from behind, caused Luther to turn sharply. One of his men towards the back of the cave - young Benn, Luther mused, screamed a warning and as Luther turned he saw the man's prostrate form disappear into the gloom. "To arms!" he thundered, and his veterans unlimbered their weapons in the blink of an eye. A high pitched whistling sound, like the call of some huge avian, sang out from the darkness, followed by a wet ripping sound that signalled the death of one of his men.

A sickening sound of snapping and crunching followed, and Luther ground his teeth in indignant fury. *Didn't you check the rear of the cave yourself?* asked that voice in his head. Its tone mocking him. *Didn't you realise the creature would be drawn to your fire for warmth? Look at the faces of your men; see how they begin to doubt your leadership.*

Luther didn't hesitate; there was no time to consider his folly. "Form the line; shields to the front!" The shield bearers rushed to the fore while behind them, their brothers raised spear and sword.

The head of the Saurian, the feathered snout dripping with the blood of poor Benn, came into the light. It regarded them hungrily with large yellow eyes. Luther drew on the power of Aknir and released it in a bolt in the direction of the creature. It impacted with great force, forcing it back into the gloom and prompting a high-pitched whistle of pain from the Plumed Saurian.

Luther sensed his magic as it undermined the thick hide of the beast where it had struck. "Aim your blows for his chest," he bellowed. "It will be weakest there and your blades can now pierce its hide."

"Yes, High Warden!" the soldiers shouted in unison. Luther watched them for a moment, glad to see the intensity of focus on their faces. This is what they had been trained for. Now he would see the value of his efforts.

The Saurian made no attempt to attack the line. A scrabbling sound – sharp talons against rock, gave away its intention to flee rather than face them. Luther shifted the earth at his feet, flowing around and past his men. Switching his hammer to his other hand, his replacement arm grabbed a flaming log from the fire as he moved. The energy in the arm impervious to the burning heat of the fire.

He ran forwards as the magic at his feet dissipated. The glow of his impromptu torch lighting a scene of carnage that confirmed the death of young Benn. He could dimly make out the hind limbs and powerful tail of the Saurian pushing up through an enlarged gap between the

boulders. The spread of broken rock around the hole suggested it must have forced its way through an opening that had previously been vastly smaller. He sighed a little at the realisation, and his guilt was lessened, if only slightly.

The High Warden turned back to his soldiers who were still in defensive formation. "It's making a run for it! If we let it escape it will pick us off one by one. We have to catch it now, before it can hide."

The second line peeled away and made for the mouth of the cave. The shield line followed. They had all seen the narrow trail pathway that led above the cave and higher up the mountain, and would use it to pursue the beast. Luther Draxos would make his own way. He called on the might of Aknir, the strength of Mellorian's depths, and willed the hole to expand and permit him entry. He stepped up into the tunnel that the Saurian had used to flee, though now much taller and wider due to his magic. The sound of his men venting their fury penetrated the rock, as did the screech of the Plumed Saurian as it met them in battle just above.

As Luther emerged from the tunnel he had created, he was dismayed to see four more men had already fallen in the short time it had taken to climb through. His eyes quickly darted back and forth on those that remained, noting sadly the loss of Thom, Arn, Chis, and Joph from their number. The remaining six soldiers held the Saurian at bay with broad shields and long spears. The creature hissed and spat as it evaluated its chance of success against well-defended foes.

The Saurian's head cocked slightly as Luther joined his men, and a decision to flee seemed evident as it tried to back away slightly. The High Warden tapped the reserve of power within his source stone and gestured upwards with both his arms. He allowed the flaming branch to drop to the ground, and as it did a wall of stone and earth rose up to cut off the Saurian's route of escape. Now there was only one way out - through him and his men.

Luther took his Warhammer back into his right hand, feeling the grip of the weapon dully through the curious azure energy that made up his replacement arm. He knew much of construction and the forging of material, but this construct of power was beyond his understanding. *The masters of Travium are powerful indeed if such works as this could be gifted freely to such underserving men as you*, the voice reproached him.

He raised his hammer to the Saurian in challenge, and whether the creature knew this or not, it seemed to respond in kind. It raised itself to full height, smaller than a warhorse, but by just a little, with powerful, taloned forearms and hind legs. It revealed dagger-like teeth as it moved its head from side to side.

Without warning, the beast leapt into the mass of Durant soldiers, its bulk throwing the first shield bearer down, and crushing the unfortunate fellow under the weight. It snapped out at Luther Draxos with a speed that was beyond human, yet Luther's reactions, aided by the magic of Aknir, were even greater. He stepped back from the attack and at the same time powerfully brought down his hammer upon the Saurian's left shoulder. Spear points jabbed into the beast in a moment after the commanders' blow; such was the precision of the T'pvar warriors. The power of the Root of Protection was proof in the blood drawn by those spears. Normally, such a thick hide would have repelled steel, but wherever Luther landed a blow, the very structure of the beast's skin was weakened enough for his men to strike true.

The Plumed Saurian reared up in agony, unused to a situation where it was not the dominant force in a fight. It lashed out with its thick, muscled tail, knocking a soldier ten feet through the air. The man landed with a crunch and stirred no more.

Luther bellowed in grief, the image of the man - Jaun the cook, filling his mind. He jumped forward and raised the hammer over his head, swinging it down onto the Saurian's spine with a tremendous crack. The beast sagged and dropped to the floor, where it was set upon by the soldiers.

They stabbed, thrust, and plunged their weapons into the weak points in the creature's hide, each drawing forth gouts of watery blood. The Saurian weakly bared its teeth in a last act of defiance at Luther. The Wizard looked down at the beast for a moment, and then he caved in its skull with one great blow from his hammer, killing it instantly.

The Durant soldiers cheered the death of the monster that had taken the life of their comrades, men who had been their close friends. Dirk, a sergeant raised to the rank only a winter

past, came up to the High Warden. "The Sleeping ones be praised High Warden," he panted. "A few more seconds before you got to us and we would have all been meat in its belly."

Luther did not turn to him; instead, he fixed his gaze down on the dead beast. "You are a soldier of Durant, Sergeant. A warrior of the T'pvar fortress," he replied coolly without looking up. "Do not underestimate your worth. Without each of you we could not have prevailed against the Saurian." Luther gestured at the carcass with his hammer. "This one was an adult male – a big one. It would have been shitting us out for a week had we been of another House than our own."

Dirk nodded his agreement. It was more than a matter of faith to a Durant man that they were the best: it was an unassailable fact. "Still," Dirk said with a question forming on his lips. "Why come here at all? Surely such a monster would have had an easier time feeding on the lesser creatures in the caves and crags above?"

With the question hanging in the air, a jet of boiling steam issued out of the darkness above them, like the vapour from a gigantic, molten tea-kettle. Luther raised his head, his brow furrowed in surprise and sudden concern. Two giant red orbs peered down at him. Intelligent and ancient eyes, ones that no man had ever seen before and lived to tell the tale.

A huge, shadowy shape stirred from the sheer rock face where it had been watching them fight. "Something even worse forced the Saurian from its lair," Luther murmured in disbelief.

A tree-trunk sized forelimb stepped down onto the shelf where the soldiers stood gawping. It crunched into the rock as long, onyx talons dug into the surface as though it were only wet clay. A massive, draconic head came closer to the flaming branch and the Durant men could now see it for the first time in terrifying clarity. It was a fire Drake. "Retreat!" Luther screamed as the jaws of the Drake opened and a blueish light began to coalesce at the back of its horrifying throat.

Luther paled, letting his Warhammer fall to the floor and dropping to his knees so that he could place both hands upon the stone. He grunted with effort as he caused the ground to rise up into a new wall, thicker and higher than the last one. He prayed that it would be enough to save them.

A gout of flame exploded against the wall no sooner than it had been raised, lighting up the mountainside with the luminescence of twenty pyres. Luther did not wait to see if his handiwork would hold. He grabbed his hammer and ran, following behind his soldiers as they raced away, running for dear life. He felt a blistering heat at his back as he ran, and knew that his cloak was on fire, but he did not slow his descent. Even at the height of his arrogance and vanity, and his power, he would not have faced a Drake alone.

On he ran, and he heard a titanic roar issue out of the darkness at his back. A rumbling sound preceded a rain of small boulders rolling down the mountain from above. Luther's heart fell as he realised the Drake was following them. "Keep going!" he cried at the men running in front of him. "Do not stop, no matter what happens."

As his words still rang out from the rocks around the trail, Luther turned on his heels and flexed his crackling weapon arm. With a sense of serenity he had not known since that fateful day in G'Barr, he suddenly knew what he had to do. No more men would die this night than was necessary, save one more. He quenched the flames at his back with a thought and waited for his doom to arrive. *Why waste your life for theirs?* the mocking voice questioned him in his head. *You are Luther Draxos, who are they to live if you should die? You are greater than a thousand fold of such base men.*

Luther felt a surge of white-hot anger, the brightness of which seemed to obliterate the oddly craven voice from his mind. "They are... my brothers!" he roared to the heavens, and to himself.

The rumbling grew louder and louder. Luther adopted a combat stance, though quite what he hoped it would achieve against such a foe he was not sure. His death was guaranteed; the only question now was could he buy enough time for his men.

He heard a sound at his back, the sound of shields locking side by side, and the sound of spears and swords drawn in a line of battle. He did not turn from the oncoming foe, but tears ran from his eyes at their actions. His regard for them was matched by his anger with himself for his lack of respect for the values they stood for. His soldiers didn't call for sacrifice. Instead, they stood at his shoulder to achieve victory, even when it was less than certain. They would not give in, and

the message to their commander was that that he should not give in either. Luther was where he should be: leading his men, as in all things, in honour.

The Drake's giant head came upon them like lightning. It lunged forwards and took a shield man in a single, savage bite. The soldier's weapons bounced harmlessly from the scales of its neck as it devoured their comrade. They were not disheartened, even though the odds were stacked against them. Each man shared a bond of fraternity, of service. They fought for the fallen, for themselves, and to do whatever they could to protect those men in the pass below who were unaware of the great danger that had been stirred from its lair.

Luther raised his hammer high and called out words of power. The air before him shimmered; it seemed to warp as though matter and time flowed at a different pace in that small portion of the world. Luther pushed out with his senses and the wave of energy flew out to contact the Drake. The monster barely registered the magic at first, but it retreated back a little as the scales on its face calcified and many broke off as though through extreme old age.

It roared again, and opened its gullet to spew out a torrent of flame. Luther slammed his hammer into the stone at his feet and a shield of magical energy rose up to cover him and his men from the flames. The air boiled above and around them, but within the dome of Aknir, the Durant men endured. The Drake ended its exhalation, a look of inhuman surprise in its huge bestial eyes.

It lunged forwards again, and this time it was met with spear, sword, and with hammer. They opened up small tears and rents in its skin from which a tiny stream of draconic blood flowed. Another man died to the Drake's teeth, and the soldiers redoubled their efforts. Luther did not have the time to register who it was that fell. He simply kept smashing his hammer into the monster's head, and his men continued to jab, slash and thrust into any soft spot they could reach. The Drake reared back with a growl of irritation. It retreated back out of range of their weapons as it regarded them with curiosity and a sudden healthy respect for their threat. It had not bled since the days of the great undulation, and the experience was a wholly unwelcome reminder.

Luther dropped to one knee, his body exhausted – excepting of course his magical arm, which would never know the fatigue the mortal parts of him were experiencing. His mind reached for new tactical solutions to their predicament, but only one risky throw of the dice remained to him. "Go!" he rumbled to his last two men, his low voice reaching each ear as though he had screamed the order. "We shall not find victory in arms against this enemy. Flee and warn the Fortress, warn the Masters of the House!"

"Nay, High Warden!" cried Dirk. "Keb and I shall share your fate, or we are not fit to bear the badge of the house."

Luther shook his head. "Go!" he repeated, exasperation breaking through his words. "You shall share my fate, you blessed fool. A victory will be had this day, even if it does not come from Durant steel. I will be following you down this blasted mountain as fast as my legs will carry me. You will know why very soon."

The soldiers did as they were asked; for they heard truth in his words and knew he meant in his heart to follow. They turned and ran, at which the Drake made no attempt to resume chase. Instead, it fixed its ancient eyes on to the lone Wizard that remained. Its long and sinewy neck writhed in curious interest as it lowered its massive head to see the human better. It was so close that Luther could feel the forge-like heat of its breath on his skin.

He raised his eyes to meet those of the Drake. For a few moments there was silence, save for the bellows-pump sound of the monster breathing. The High Warden nodded once to the beast, which it seemed to take as an acknowledgment of its superiority, rather than the respect Luther offered. It rose up again, the better to strike and swallow its prey. It had failed to notice the energy Luther was channelling through the ground. A massive boulder shook itself free from the mountainside and rolled forcefully into the Drake's back. More boulders began to free themselves as the mountainside shook violently all around them.

Luther smiled as the Drake screeched in pain. Without waiting another moment, lest the boulders he released miss their target and crush him instead, Luther broke and ran for his life. The sound of impacts and bestial roars rang out behind him. He was sure it would not be enough to kill the Drake, but he hoped it would be enough to keep it busy at least.

On and on, down and down he ran. The sound of his men was always below, just out of sight but still close enough to give him the will to carry on. If not for them, he knew in his heart that he would have stopped and met his fate, so tired and spent was his power. In later months, Luther would reflect on this moment, where his love and respect for his men would save his life.

They ran for what felt like hours, fatigue and concern drawing out the minutes and the seconds to feel interminable. The Durant men continued to run, listening all the while to the Drake thrash under the weight of the rock Luther had brought down upon it; or for the sounds of boulders unleashed by the High Warden's magic that might crush them if they stood still. Eventually, they were forced to stop through total exhaustion. Luther came upon them and fell to his knees.

He listened to odd sounds emanating from the throat of Sergeant Dirk. Whether it was laughing or crying, Luther knew not. Either would have been appropriate and fully justified at this moment. The roars of the wounded Drake became more distant. Luther released a great sigh of relief to know the Drake had now been dissuaded from its meal.

Luther raised his head to the heavens. He was far from a religious man, but he was grateful for their deliverance all the same. It didn't matter that he would suffer the agony of drawing on too much power this day. He would welcome the pain, for it was well earned.

He breathed deeply, and allowed himself to sink to the floor where he felt the cool stone and dirt of the mountainside against his hot and sweaty skin. Before blackness came upon him, his mind went back to something that had niggled him, even as he fought the huge beast.

If the Drake forced the Saurian from its lair and the Drakes are known to dwell far higher even than that, then what is it that forced the Drake from its nest?

Far above, beyond the lairs of the Plumed Saurians, the hideous Jabberwocks, and even the fire Drakes that lived in the high peaks, a fortress of black stone was slowly and painstakingly being constructed on the summit of the mountain. In the thin, night air demonic slaves toiled ceaselessly to build a dwelling suitable for their lord.

The mountain, already home to a dizzying array of deadly monsters, had now found a new master.